"Precious States of Mind": The Aesthetic Encounter in Victorian Literature

by Meghan A Freeman

“PRECIOUS STATES OF MIND”: THE AESTHETIC ENCOUNTER IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

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Meghan A. Freeman

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This dissertation investigates literary representations of the scene of viewership in Victorian literature in order to interrogate how the narrative rendering of the “aesthetic encounter” brings to the fore the social and material realities of such moments that contemporary philosophical treatises on the subject often overlook, obscure, or repress. I am interested in the ways in which the scene or environment of the aesthetic encounter—be it in a private gallery or public museum space—structures power relations grounded in notions of taste, cultivation, and civility. Because the nineteenth-century philosophical aesthetic treatise does not avow the material conditions of viewing art, the narrative representation of such moments is particularly important in revealing that aesthetic experience is not and cannot be an intensely private moment, but is rather one that is thoroughly social and highly performative. Narrating the scene of aesthetic encounter in the nineteenth century was part of a larger cultural effort to represent sociality, to comprehend the vast network of circumstances and contingencies that determines one’s relation to and perspective on the world and the other people in it. Depicting individual subjectivities in the act of aesthetic experience, writers such as Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Walter Pater, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James demystify the ideologies at work—and the ideologies being naturalized—in the viewing of paintings, the contemplation of sculpture, and in the admiration of cameos and antique coins. Throughout the

dissertation I argue for renewed attention to how the increasingly experimental representations of the aesthetic encounter found in nineteenth-century literature rendered viewership an inherently self-conscious performance, paving the way for the novelistic portraits of artists as young men that were to dominate the literary landscape of the early twentieth century.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Meghan Amanda Freeman was born in 1978 in Evanston, Illinois, to Timothy and Deborah Freeman. At the age of eight, she moved with her parents and her sister, Meredith, to Hong Kong, where she quickly developed a yen for, among other things, British accents and dim sum. The family eventually moved to upstate New Jersey, which, if not quite Walden, has forests and bookstores enough to satisfy the most meditative of wanderers. Meghan's meditative wanderings were given direction in her high school English courses, and she went on to study literature at Williams College. Her experience as a visiting student at Oxford University influenced her decision to specialize in nineteenth-century British literature, while the dreaming spires of the city, more specifically, inspired her senior thesis on Victorian medievalism, a project incomparably helmed by Professor Alison Case. After graduation, Meghan moved to New York City to work at Swann Galleries in the Posters Department. She left the auction house to begin her graduate work at Cornell, where her interest in British literature was quickly revived and deepened through seminars directed by Professor James Eli Adams, Professor Fredric Bogel, and Professor Harry Shaw. However, that year spent in the working world among beautiful objects sparked an interest in art culture that ultimately shaped her dissertation project, which considers the intersections between literature, aesthetics, and material culture in the nineteenth century.

Meghan received her M.A. in 2005 and her Ph.D. in 2010. She is currently an adjunct assistant professor in the English Department at Tulane University, and she resides in uptown New Orleans with her husband, Dwight Codr, and their standard poodle, Le Baron.

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Like any solitary endeavor, the writing of a dissertation can be lonely work, and for that reason, I am especially thankful for the friends who have assisted and encouraged me along the way. First among them, I would like to thank Meredith Prithviraj, with whom I've always discussed books, movies, and everything else of importance. At Cornell, I have profited immensely from the friendship of Angela Naimou and David Coombs. David, I would like to thank for his helpful comments on various chapter drafts and for his hilarious readings of particularly pathetic scenes from minor Victorian texts. Angela, my partner in associational thinking, has been my staunchest advocate and closest friend from our earliest days in graduate school, and I have lost count of all the times in which I found myself at an impasse, only to be given a renewed sense of purpose and direction from her insightful questions and comments. Tulane has also provided a decidedly collegial environment, and I would like to thank my friends there, especially Thomas Albrecht, Paula Morris, and Kellie Warren.

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her exclamation of wonder at the regard of her chosen companion in life and literature articulates what I otherwise could not so eloquently express: “Can you care for me so much . . . *you*? Then *that* is light enough to account for all the shadows, & to make them almost unregarded—the shadows of the life behind.”

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INTRODUCTION.

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Though the British Museum itself was established in 1753, it was not until seventy years later that plans were made to build a separate gallery for its works of art, a space separate from the stuffed penguins, topographical maps, and Egyptian antiquities with which they had previously vied for attention. Yet, this "fit space" ultimately proved unnecessary, owing to the founding of the National Gallery only one year later (1824), and by 1838, the latter institution was housed in its own, specially-designed building in Trafalgar Square. The former site of the King's Mews, or the Royal Stables, Trafalgar Square was chosen for the site of the National Gallery because it was (in the words of Sir Robert Peel) "in the very gangway of London," its central location ensuring that it could be most easily accessed by people from all social classes. Renovated and expanded over the course of the century, the National Gallery remained in Trafalgar Square, a testament to its intended function, not simply as a monument to culture but also as a space devoted to the facilitation of acculturating experiences. As one Parliamentarian put it in 1857, "the existence of the pictures is not the end purpose of the collection, but the means only to give the people an ennobling enjoyment: to purify their tastes and wean them from polluting and debasing habits."[1]

A point of departure for many compelling studies of modern museum culture, the timely relocation of the first national art collection from the crowded periphery to the symbolic epicenter of London at the commencement of Victoria's reign is often read as foreshadowing the proliferation in the nineteenth century of public spaces

[1] This quote is attributed to Lord Justice Coleridge of the 1857 Parliamentary Commission, and is here taken from "The Perpetual Present," by Neil MacGregor in *Oxford Today: The University Magazine* (vol 15, no. 1, 2002): <http://www.oxfordtoday.ox.ac.uk/2002-03/v15n1/04.shtml>

designed specifically for the appreciation of art. The founding of the National Gallery figures not as a beginning but as a culmination of sorts, in the developments that this study traces. The construction of the National Gallery merely concretized and institutionalized a series of ideas, investments, and attitudes of a culture already engaged with aesthetic philosophy. Through exposure to works of Continental and Romantic thought of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, works like Friedrich Schiller's O*n the Aesthetic Education of Man,* Victorian Britain had already invested in a belief that aesthetic experience possessed a civilizing function, offering a means of refining "that faculty which connects Man with the world" and of regenerating an age whose "great idol" was "Utility."[2] Considered from this angle, the nation's first public art museum stands as a spatialization of the dominant conceptions of the period about the experience of art. Its central location speaks to the cumulative cultural capital attached to aesthetic knowledge; its exclusiveness content-wise to a growing ideological distance between art objects and other kinds of cultural artifacts; and its internal structuring to the complex, specific, and highly mediated nature of the encounter between viewer and object.

The Victorian investment in aesthetic experience as "an ennobling enjoyment," one that should be encouraged precisely because it "purif[ies]" the taste by "wean[ing]" the individual away from various unsavory "habits," helps to explain the founding of museums, the proliferation of treatises and guidebooks to aid the viewer in navigating these new spaces, and the rise to prominence enjoyed by such sages of culture as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde. Yet, especially when considering these more tangible *effects* of the century's preoccupation with the realm of the aesthetic, it seems worth asking, what was its *affect*? In other words, how did the cultural obsession with such experiences shape

[2] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man,* trans. Reginald Snell (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954) 69, 26.

how experience generally was felt, perceived, and understood, both in the moment and afterwards? Henry James, in his unfinished and posthumously published memoir *The Middle Years,* poses a similar question, answering it for himself in the process:

> Could one in those days feel anything with force, whether for pleasure or for pain, without feeling it as an immense little act or event of life, and as therefore taking place on a scene and in circumstances scarce at all to be separated from its own sense and impact?—so that to recover it is to recover the whole medium, the material pressure of things, and find it most marked for preservation as an aspect, even, distinguishable, a "composition."[3]

"Those days" of which James is speaking are, in essence, the last third of the nineteenth century, when as a young man he traveled from America to Europe to immerse himself in the art culture of which he was to become one of its most gifted chroniclers. Describing the hey-day of Victorian aestheticism from the distance of half a century, James's recollection of his aesthetic apprenticeship strives to locate his own experiences within a larger cultural movement, underscoring how he felt his own "little act or event of life" to be illuminated and enlarged by virtue of its unfolding in the midst of "a scene and in circumstances" that seemed almost designed to engender moments of sensory impact. As this reminiscence suggests, the charm of those days is attributable to how the pervasive interest in aesthetics created a heady atmosphere which lent to potentially "anything" that generated a strong emotional response a kind of luster, a perceptible beauty. Even if art culture provided the impetus for this new-found sensitivity, its effect extended beyond an appreciation for celebrated artifacts, heightening the viewer's awareness of his own perceptual faculties. The milieu of an England enlivened by a communal preoccupation with art thus becomes itself a picturesque backdrop against which the viewer's own aesthetic experiences are "immense" performances worth viewing in their own right, worth thinking about as experiences.

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[3] Henry James, *The Middle Years* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917) 51-52.

If one is capable of calling to mind the sensations and impressions felt at such moments, James contends, one might also "recover the whole medium, the material pressure of things" that shaped and preserved those moments themselves as "aspect[s]" or "composition[s]." Yet, in what form are those impressions to be recovered? How can the "material pressure of things" be conveyed so as to communicate the inherently aesthetic and compositional quality to someone outside of the moment? James gives the reader a clue as to the sorts of epistemological frames that are not up to the task with another rhetorical question, asking how one could "not recognize that to live through the extravagant youth of the aesthetic era . . . was to seem privileged to such immensities as history would find left to her to record but with bated breath?"[4] Seen from the vantage point of the future, the "youth of the aesthetic era" presents—to James's mind—a challenge to "history," which can only approach its "immensities" with "bated breath." The problem, it is implied, lies in history's (theoretically) objective perspective. In order to create a "record" of a particular period, the historian must stand outside of the temporal flow of history, assuming a distanced and distancing perspective in relation to events he is trying to organize and contain. When faced, though, with an era that James sees as defined by its *extra*vagance, by a tendency to exceed or otherwise stray beyond prescribed boundaries, historicizing projects cannot but fail to capture the essence of "the whole medium," which is to be found not in the events but in the participants' impressions of them.

James critiques historical efforts to "recover" the aesthetic era because, to his mind, fiction offers the best means of conveying the intensity of such moments, especially when such moments are part of a near-distant past in which one lived, felt, and saw intensely. In the preface to *The Aspern Papers*, James describes his "delight"

[4] *The Middle Years* 50.

as a novelist "in a palpable imaginable *visitable* past—in the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries, the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table."[5] In fiction, the past can be imaginatively (re)visited, the "marks and signs" of this lost world conjured up by the author through the narrativization of events. Not bounded by the same pledge to objectivity, the author of fiction also has the freedom to recover a historical period by focalizing a particular milieu through the subjective impressions of various characters. In this way, the extravagant materiality of a historical period itself obsessed with artistic materials can be "recognized" narratively, in the affective responses they evoke in the "privileged" fictional spectator.

James's meditations on this topic are pertinent to this dissertation project for a number of reasons. For one thing, James himself is just the sort of author that this passage from *The Middle Years* calls for. In his early novel, *The Portrait of a Lady,* his heroine Isabel Archer, like James himself, travels to Europe in search of the same sort of aesthetic apprenticeship, immersing herself in art culture both in England and on the Continent. Yet, James, unlike Isabel, went to Europe not simply to gain first-hand experience of the aesthetic era then in bloom but also to learn how to write about it. He spent his own "extravagant youth" in honing a critical and literary sensibility devoted to the representation of perceptual experiences with beautiful objects, first as a drama and art critic and later as a novelist. James, though, is the last author on whom this dissertation focuses, and his argument in *The Middle Years* mostly confirms what his early novel and the fiction of earlier authors suggest: that the nineteenth-century preoccupation with aesthetics left a discernible impression on the literature of the period in that literature's commitment to representing subjectivities in the act of contemplation and, conversely, that prose narratives emerged during that

[5] Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Aspern Papers,* ed. Anthony Curtis (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986) 31.

period as the primary means of rendering intelligible the experience of the aesthetic that was so profoundly affecting to Victorian culture.

If the central tenets of nineteenth-century aestheticism can be said to have been articulated in critical texts such as Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's periodical *The Germ*, and Pater's *The Renaissance*, the narrativized representation of the aesthetic encounter in contemporary fiction put theory into practice, revealing the intensely self-conscious and indeed performative reality underlying the transcendent experiential ideal associated with aesthetic observation. Contextualizing such aesthetic moments—relocating them from the rarified environs of philosophical abstraction to a particular historically-determined milieu—these narratives strove to illuminate the external and internal impulses that, amidst the rancorous scientific and religious debates of the day, drove people towards a mode of experience that promised some reconciliation of body and spirit, ape and essence. Still, as this project aims to demonstrate, the search for some form of psychic integrity is only one part of the allure of the narrative modeling of aesthetic experience. Victorian authors also returned to the scene of the aesthetic encounter because it provided a vehicle for representing sociality, for evoking that "material pressure of things" to which James referred, the vast network of circumstances and contingencies that determines one's relation to and perspective on the world and the other people in it.

The narrative modeling of aesthetic experience that this dissertation undertakes to explore is crucially tied to Gerard Genette's notion of the aesthetic relation, which "consists in an emotional response (of appreciation) to an attentional object, whatever it might be, considered with regard to its aspect."[6] For Genette, the term "aesthetic" is applicable only in the moment when the viewing subject is engaged in appreciating the

[6] Gerard Gennette, *The Aesthetic Relation*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999) 222.

physical aspect of a particular object. Moreover, even in this moment, neither the viewer nor the object itself is deemed "aesthetic"; it is only the relation between them, a bond as transitory as it is irreproducible. Genette's aesthetic relation allows us to (re)theorize and (re)interpret an experience that is all too often understood as proceeding from the existence of an objectively and intrinsically meaningful art object (the fetishization of a painting, for instance) or from that of a uniquely endowed viewing subject (the cult status of the connoisseur or aesthete) by redirecting our attention to the performance of viewing itself. If Genette's aesthetic relation narrows our focus in one direction, by limiting the idea of the aesthetic only to the moment in which perceptual appreciation is occurring, it broadens our potential scope of inquiry by encouraging the consideration not of viewers and objects but also of the specificities of the situation in which this relation takes place. Also, in stressing the temporality of the aesthetic, the fact that it is grounded in a particular context consisting of a scene, a setting, and a specific viewer located in a social and historical milieu, Genette's aesthetic relation raises the question of what precedes, surrounds, and follows such moments of experience.

At the same time, using the aesthetic relation as a foundational concept disqualifies, for the purposes of this project, at least, certain types of literature that are typically associated with aesthetic matters. Ekphrastic poetry, for example, which attempts to describe in language a visual work of art, falls outside the boundaries of this study because it claims to focus exclusively on the representation of the object. Similarly, the künstlerroman, the artist-novel (such as Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*), and its cousin, the aesthete-novel (Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), subordinate aesthetic experience to narratives that chart the formation and development of the mind and the sensibilities of their respective subjects. The texts that figure in this dissertation differ in their primary focus on the *experience* of the

aesthetic. This common interest reflects a broader cultural preoccupation with navigating the extravagant materiality of the period—a materiality that can be (and has been, in various critical studies) linked to the explosion of industry, particularly the mass marketing of consumer goods; to scientific and technological advancement; to the expansion of a global economy that facilitated the procurement of materials and the distribution of products; and to urbanization and the concomitant population shift to various, fast-growing centers of industry. If these developments engendered widespread feelings of alienation and anomie for which aesthetic experience was the prescribed remedy, this situation also made aestheticism a kind of industry. Yet, I am less interested in aestheticism's attempts to obscure its connections to the material culture which was its necessary precondition than I am in exploring how the cultural sensitivity to the pressures of materiality made its way into the literature of the period in the form of the aesthetic encounter. Linking nineteenth-century authors as diverse as Charlotte Brontë, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walter Pater, George Eliot, and, of course, Henry James, their various representations of aesthetic experience provide a means of recognizing the web of relations that connect the individual to society, a web of relations that can be made visible by narrativizing the process by which the individual engages with a vast symbolic economy in the contemplation of the art object.

Representing the encounter between viewer and object, as that encounter unfolds within framing spaces such as museums, galleries, and ruins, these narratives all strive, in different ways and to different ends, to convey the social dynamics that underwrite individual aesthetic experiences. These social dynamics are partially constituted by the cultural and economic factors that determine the vantage-point of a particular viewer, such as that viewer's class or race or gender. Nevertheless, the aesthetic encounter in these texts is ultimately a social occurrence because the individual's aesthetic experience takes place within these framing spaces and thus is

itself a narratable phenomenon. These narratives of aesthetic experience complicate what in aesthetic theory is typically figured as a private dyadic relation by locating that relation in the public arena, amidst spaces created for viewership and peopled with other viewers, who are themselves potential witnesses to the individual's engagement with the art object. By stripping away the privacy that philosophy grants to its hypothetical viewer, the authors of these narratives reveal the self-conscious, highly performative nature of aesthetic experience, its social aspect, its compositionality. All formally experimental, the narrative representations of the aesthetic encounter I consider here depict the viewer's experience with the art object and the aesthetic culture in which it is situated as a moment that is revelatory of that viewer's unconscious or conscious engagement with various cultural practices, norms, and values.

Though these encounters all suggest that aesthetic experience discloses some form of otherwise elusive interiority in the viewer, the interiority intimated in the private act of contemplation nevertheless is shown to have a social component, being both "interpretable" (insofar as it can be analyzed by others in observance) and "interpretive" (as the unique form of viewership practiced by the individual indicates how that individual understands and challenges the sorts of social scripts that inform such moments). That being said, even if these narratives posit a social function for aesthetic experience, the idea of interiority on display for the scrutiny of others should not be confused with the Shaftesburian ideal of *sensus communis.* These narratives offer no rapturous dissolution of the boundaries between individual consciousnesses, no mythic melding of discrete perspectives into some communal or sympathetic sensory experience. Instead, the narrative of the aesthetic encounter typically puts on display a web of relations: between things, between the viewer and the object, the viewer and other viewers, the viewer and the scene of viewership. Plotting out these

relations, these narratives attempt to chart something so ephemeral and yet so immense as the coming-together of sensibilities, preferences, choices, and circumstances in an inimitable quasi-chemical reaction to determine the form and outcome of aesthetic experience. Goethe attributed the strange alchemy of such moments to the workings of what he called "elective affinities" (*die Wahlverwandtschaften*). Though Goethe applied the term more specifically to the passions, to the ways in which combinations of internal and external forces act upon individuals, governing love and other human relations, this dissertation aims to situate the aesthetic firmly within the realm of the social, and thus, argues that the study of the sociality of the aesthetic encounter, as it is depicted in nineteenth-century prose narratives, contributes a crucial dimension to that same history of aesthetics that would culminate in such cultural revolutions as that implied by the founding of the National Gallery.

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Before offering chapter summaries of these longer prose narratives and of my analyses of how their authors employed the aesthetic encounter in various explorations of the social dynamics that structure and are revealed by such moments of viewership, I would first provide a reading of two scenes of aesthetic encounter, in order to delineate the common narrative framework out of which these scenes emerge. These two scenes are taken from poetic narratives, the first being an excerpt from Book I of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epic verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and the second being Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" (1842). Given the fact that the body of this dissertation is exclusively concerned with novels and short pieces of prose fiction, using poetry to exemplify this narrative framework might seem counter-intuitive. However, these texts align themselves with the works later to be discussed in that they endeavor to situate the perspectives of their respective speaking

subjectivities socially through that speaker's engagement with an art object. Also, when read in conjunction, the differences between the two speakers (one a Victorian poetess looking back on an experience that proved formative to the development of her imagination, the other a widowed, Renaissance-era Duke showing off the portrait of his late wife to an envoy of the father of his next one) reveal the social dynamics that structure the aesthetic encounter, rendering it a performance of a particular sensibility.

In each instance, the strange tale of how the art object came to be painted provides the motivation to speech, which in turn prompts both speakers to offer stories of their own aesthetic development—narrating through their descriptions of a portrait the construction of their identities as viewers. For both speakers, their aesthetic perspectives replicate the defining features of their social positions, those of grieving daughter and frustrated husband. Taken together, Browning's dramatic monologue stands as an illuminating complement to the scene in his wife's verse-novel, as both speakers condense into a single speech a series of discrete impressions of one portrait. But whereas Barrett Browning intimates that diversity of perspective is articulated over time, through experience and multiple aesthetic encounters, Browning's Duke suggests the possible contemporaneity of divergent aesthetic perspectives. Notwithstanding this difference, in both poems an encounter with a painting exposes the intricate web of contingencies that predetermines a particular viewer's experience of a specific art object and shows the eye to be anything but "innocent." In this relatively focused comparison of two of the Brownings' most famous "men and women," a comparison that foregrounds the dynamic of gender, I look to the rhetorical strategies employed by these two speakers in order to trace the basic outline of the aesthetic encounter, setting the stage for my subsequent analyses of this moment as it is depicted within the broader frame of the prose narrative.

More than a decade before the publication of *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in a letter to the novelist Mary Russell Mitford, recounts an exchange between herself and her sister Arabella that underscores one of the central questions of the aesthetic encounter, the question of how the same art object can provoke such vastly dissimilar responses in different viewers. She describes her sister's visit to the shared studio space of "Mr. Haydon & Mr. Lucas," where Arabella views a singularly unimpressive fresco of the angel Uriel, a "captivat[ing]" portrait of the children of a Mr. Talfourd, and, finally,

> the lovely portrait of Lady Burlington—most lovely--& which so little impressed her with the sense of sadness, that she quite started when I told her of the circumstances related to it—"Taken after death!—Why it looks so youthful & smiling & full of life!"—
>
> How differently the light falls on different minds!—Your friend, whose letter you sent me, [could] even see the parting pitying look!—and I hope she is right.[7]

What fascinates the poet about her sister's experience of John Lucas's painting is her lack of impressionability as to its tragic subtext. A mourning portrait, the picture of Lady Burlington was painted in commemoration after her death, a circumstance that Barrett Browning feels must be somehow visible in the painting itself, in spite of the fact that its subject is represented as "full of life." That one of Mary Russell Mitford's friends claimed to have "see[n] that parting pitying look" of a departing soul whereas Arabella Barrett only saw a "youthful [woman] smiling" points to a familiar interpretive crux. How do we account for the differences between one impression of an art object and another? Is one viewer simply more capable of recognizing an objective truth hidden from less discerning spectators, or, is the discrepancy evidence

[7] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "To Mary Russell Mitford" ([13] October 1841), Letter 116 of *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 1836-1854*, ed. Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan, Vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, 1983) 287.

of the absolute relativity of aesthetic impressions and judgments? To echo Barrett Browning, how does one begin to understand "how differently the light falls on different minds"?

For Barrett Browning, as her phrase suggests, the answer lies in the province of the viewer, when in the moment of aesthetic encounter the light falls just so and illuminates not a portrait, but a particular subjectivity in the act of contemplation. In other words, it is the perceptual performance--the dynamic process by which the viewing subject engages with an art object—that seems potentially revelatory of the mysterious origins and enigmatic nature of aesthetic impressions. Barrett Browning pursues this possibility more than a decade later, when she recreates the circumstances of her sister's aesthetic encounter in *Aurora Leigh*.[8] Certain details are, of course, altered. Most importantly, instead of a casual viewer's brief glance at a painting of a woman of fashion, the moment is reimagined as a child's protracted scrutiny of the portrait of her mother. That being said, the story and description of the painting itself, its almost palpable aura of sadness and strangeness, answers to how Barrett Browning imagined the earlier experience in her letter:

> The painter drew it after she was dead,
> And when the face was finished, throat and hands,
> Her cameriera carried him, in hate
> Of the English-fashioned shroud, the last brocade
> She dressed in at the Pitti ; 'he should paint
> No sadder thing than that,' she swore, 'to wrong
> Her poor signora.' Therefore very strange
> The effect was. I, a little child, would crouch
> For hours upon the floor with knees drawn up,
> And gaze across them, half in terror, half
> In adoration, at the picture there,
> [. . .] That way went my thoughts
> When wandering beyond sight. And as I grew

[8] See note 1.128 in *Aurora Leigh*, edited by Margaret Reynolds, (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1999) 590. I am indebted to Reynolds for her mention of this letter to Mary Mitford and her noting of the "similar circumstances" behind the portrait of Lady Burlington and that of Aurora's mother.

In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously,
Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
[. . .]With still that face . . . which did not therefore change,
But kept the mystic level of all forms
[. . .] All which images,
Concentred on the picture, glassed themselves
Before my meditative childhood, as
The incoherencies of change and death
Are represented fully, mixed and merged,
In the smooth fair mystery of perpetual Life.—[9]

Although the mourning portrait is intended for remembrance—committing to canvas the likeness of a person whose physical body has since been committed to the earth—Barrett Browning's word-picture substitutes for an ekphrastic description of the mother's features a more impressionistic rendering of the "very strange effect" that this unchanging face had on the developing imagination of its most devoted viewer, her daughter. Affording the reader not sight (of the art object) but rather *in*sight (into the mind of the speaker-observer), this opening passage of *Aurora Leigh* offers up a condensed narrative of its heroine's formative years mostly through this story of her aesthetic education, an education given not at her mother's knee, but through her portrait.

It is an intriguingly reversed process: instead of enumerating for the reader those books, remarks, and dreams that colored and altered Aurora's impression of her mother's picture, Barrett Browning instead gestures towards those determining, if random, factors through her heroine's changing perception of the same art object over time. [10] As an image continually "glassed" before her, Aurora's mother's portrait

[9] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh,* ed. Margaret Reynolds (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1999) First Book: 128-138, 145-148, 151-152, 168-173. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

[10] In some ways, Barrett Browning's representation of her heroine's aesthetic meditation invites comparisons to Schiller's conception of the "aesthetic state." For Schiller, in the "aesthetic state," a state "out of time," the mind is not forced to situate itself in one of two oppositional modes of being—that of "feeling" and of "thought"—what we might label the subjective and the objective perspectives or what Schiller elsewhere calls the state of being either a "person" (the private self) or an "individual" (the social self). Unanchored from either of these determining contexts, Schiller argues, the aesthetic state allows for an otherwise impossible freedom and an unparalleled "capacity for humanity." Without

functions as reflection of her own "meditative childhood." By communicating the story of that childhood through a history of subjective impressions, Barrett Browning would seem to suggest that the development of Aurora's unique perspective can itself be the subject of observation and narration, as that perspective is reflected in aesthetic encounters.

In "My Last Duchess," the represented perspective of Browning's Duke could not be farther away, socially or morally, from that of Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh. Yet, the fundamental differences in their subject positions render all the more significant the points of correspondence between their utterances. In both cases, the speaker's avowed motivation is to explain the circumstances behind the picture, the story of how it came into being, but the real intention behind their speeches is to grasp the painting's curious hold over them. As each poem recounts not a single instance but rather a *history* of viewing, they read like anatomies of a repetition compulsion, a poetic dissection of an obsession that demands the speakers' continual return to a painting of a dead woman. In "My Last Duchess," though the ostensible occasion is a visit from the envoy of the father of his next wife-to-be, the Duke does not consider this silent agent's reaction in and of itself, but rather in relation to the reactions of previous viewers:

> . . . for never read
> Strangers like you that pictured countenance
> The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
> But to myself they turned (since none puts by
> The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
> And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst
> How such a glance came there . . . (6-12)[11]

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entering into Schiller's philosophical project of culture formation, Barrett Browning's depiction of Aurora in her own aesthetic state also represents this moment as capable of somehow bridging the gap between her character's subjective and objective identities. See Friedrich Schiller's *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man,* Letters XXI–XXII.

[11] Robert Browning, *Robert Browning's Poetry,* ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) 83. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

Like Barrett Browning's Aurora, for whom the visible "awe" of her nursemaid and the "melancholy eyes" of her father continually direct her own gaze towards her mother's portrait, Browning's Duke is motivated by the inquiring glances of his pre-selected audiences to repeatedly (re)view the "pictured countenance" of his dead wife. And also like Aurora, the Duke locates a large part of the picture's fascination in its strange status as a signifier without a living signified. As he says by way of an introduction, "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive. I call / That piece a wonder, now" (1-3). The comma that Browning places before the "now" underscores the temporality of his aesthetic relation to the portrait. Prior to that point, the correspondence between the representation and the object represented was total and, thus, unremarkable; "now," the Duke implies, the painting evokes his wonder, not only because of the technical skill it displays, but also because this technical skill serves to create an alternate reality of sorts, depicting his dead wife "*looking as if* she were alive" (emphasis mine). Though the painting has not itself changed, how the Duke sees it has. In the absence of a living model, the *lifelike* nature of the copy takes on a rather uncanny significance and the process by which it came to be—"Fra Pandolf's hands / Worked busily a day, and there she stands"—is retrospectively imbued with a touch of the mystical or even mythic (the living woman turned into an art object, a reversal of the Pygmalion story).

Aurora Leigh's recollection of her mother's portrait is also colored with elements of the fantastical, and as with the Duke, it is partially the circumstances of the painting's composition that render it such a compelling and unnerving object. As Aurora states, "[t]he painter drew it after she was dead," and even then, it was a two-part process, with the face, throat and hands painted first—presumably while the corpse was still on display—and an Italian brocade gown filled in at some later point. Though it is unclear just when Aurora learned of the way in which the portrait was

painted, the description of how her child-self perceived the image of her mother still replicates the disjunction within the painting process; to her eyes, the relation between her mother's exposed body and the posthumously-added clothing is a dipolar one, with "That swan-like supernatural white life / Just sailing upward from the red stiff silk / Which seemed to have no part in it nor power / To keep it from quite breaking out of bounds" (I: 139-142). Coded into Aurora's description, it would seem, is a partially obscured symbolism that, like the Duke's, gestures towards the "wonder" of representing what is no longer physically present. White life and red dress, the oppositional energies ascribed to these components of the image put them in a relation to one another analogous to the Christian conception of the relation between the two components of man—the soul and the body. In fact, the process by which Aurora's mother's portrait was painted has precedent in Emmanuel Swedenborg's "The Interaction Between the Body and the Soul" (1769), in which he makes the following analogy: "The spiritual clothes itself with the natural, as a man clothes himself with a garment."[12] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, herself a devoted Swedenborgian, has literalized Swedenborg's analogy in Aurora's description of her mother's portrait.[13] With the mother's body (her face, throat, and hands) symbolizing what in her is "spiritual" and her garment symbolizing what is "natural," the inherent volatility of the image (as Barrett Browning depicts it) can be understood in terms of the possibilities and limitations of representation. Though Aurora literally *sees* the figure of her mother reanimated within the boundaries of the picture frame, her perception is

[12] Interestingly, Pater directly refers to this same analogy in *Appreciations*, vol. 5 in *The Works of Walter Pater* (London: Macmillan, 1901), in his discussion of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life* sonnet sequence: "The dwelling-place in which one finds oneself by chance or destiny, yet can partly fashion for oneself; never properly one's own at all, if it be changed too lightly; in which every object has its associations…grown now to be a kind of raiment to one's body, as the body, according to Swedenborg, is but the raiment of the soul—under that image the whole of Rossetti's work might count as a House of Life, of which he is but the 'Interpreter.' And it is a "haunted" house" (214).

[13] Barrett Browning's letters attest to a deep and abiding interest in Swedenborg. See Richard Line's "Swedenborgian Ideas in the Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning," *Journal of the Swedenborg Society* 3 (2004): 23-44.

colored by the fact that she knows that what she sees is no longer true. The uneasy balance between what Aurora sees and what Aurora knows is figured in her perception of her mother's portrait as a dangerously unstable conjoining of parts, the quasi-spiritual component of the figure ("the supernatural white life") straining to "sail[] away" from the material component ("the red stiff silk") in an attempt to get beyond the "bounds" of the phenomenal world and of representability.

Aurora finds the representation of her mother unsettling precisely because it seems to gesture towards something that is unrepresentable, a spiritual or supernatural element that is only just containable within the limits of the frame. The portrait's "very strange effect" in turn generates a compulsive need to look, a need rooted "half in terror, half / In admiration." As a process of perception, Aurora's viewing of her mother's image seems structurally more like an experience of the sublime than the beautiful. Both terror and admiration are, according to Edmund Burke, feelings associated with the former, as is "astonishment," "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror . . . [and] the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it."[14] Burke's description of astonishment—a "passion" that he argues is "caused by the great and sublime in nature"—corresponds quite closely to Aurora's recollection of her own state of mind upon viewing her mother's portrait. In her words, "as I grew / In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously, / Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed, / Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful, / Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque, / With still that face . . . which did not therefore change, / But kept the mystic level of all forms" (146-152). The image of "that face"—already the point of intersection between the spiritual and the material—becomes for Aurora the revelatory, embodied form for every new sensation or

[14] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Part II, Section I, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin Books, 1998) 101

impression. An unchanging object whose subjective significance is always changing, its fascination and its horror are grounded in its overwhelming surplus of meaning, in the idea that, viewed from a particular vantage point, it can *mean* almost anything and, in theory, everything at once. Considered in retrospect, Aurora's aesthetic awakening is portrayed as a sort of natural process of sedimentation, in which the art object gradually comes into significance through the build-up of various, often contradictory associations. Barrett Browning conveys the uneven (if inexorable) nature of the process through the syntax of Aurora's description. A mixture of syndetic, asyndetic, and polysyndetic coordinations, this list of all the things Aurora reads into her mother's picture condenses into a few lines what would have been a long sequence of experiences. The syntactical proximity between terms as well as the emphasis put on the grammatical bonds between them underscores the intricate interconnections between the ideas and impressions that informed Aurora's perception of her mother's portrait. More broadly, it suggests that Barrett Browning saw the aesthetic relation of female viewer to feminine art object as potentially something of an open channel, in which flows a seemingly endless series of "images that yet fresh images beget," the sheer abundance of which is always threatening to overwhelm and to compromise the boundary between the perceiving consciousness and the object on display.

While Browning's Duke also associates the portrait of his dead wife with a host of disparate memories, in his experience a painting conveys meaning not as an opening up of potentialities but rather as a foreclosing of them. The Duke's pleasure in the portrait is, in fact, directly linked to his conception of the picture frame as both a representational and semantic means of confinement. This confinement, he assures his silent guest, was necessary precisely because, when a living woman, the Duchess's enigmatic expression was evocative of too many things:

. . . Sir, ‘t was not
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess’s cheek . . .
. . . She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked what e’er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, ‘t was all one! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each (13-29)

Offended that “‘t was not / Her husband’s presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess’s cheek,” the Duke represents her responsiveness to different stimuli as a kind of indiscretion verging on unfaithfulness. The twisted logic behind this argument hinges on the double-meaning that Browning’s speaker exploits in his many references to the Duchess’s “looks.” Even in his opening description of the Duchess “painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive,” the Duke’s ambiguous phrasing supports two different interpretations: the Duchess could be “looking” lifelike (*to* a viewer) or she could be lifelike in that she is represented in the act of ”looking” (*at* the viewer). In the Duke’s argument, these two ways for a woman “to look” are invariably and deliberately conflated. Like all of Browning’s ingenious casuists, the Duke is not only describing a situation, he is defending his particular way of viewing the world, which erases the distinction between “looking” as a subjective act and “looking” as an objective, observable phenomenon.

Looking at his wife’s portrait, the Duke locates the primary aesthetic value of “that pictured countenance” specifically in “the depth and passion of its earnest glance” (6-7). As he tells his guest, it is this look that captures the attention of “strangers like you,” who wonder “how such a glance came there” (12). It is a question—one might observe—that the silent auditor should have asked of himself. After all, the Duke’s reference to previous “strangers”—each of whom stood in the

spot of this guest—implies that this moment of display is anything but a whim. Rather, it is a scripted encounter between viewer and art object, and it is one of the Duke's own fashioning. More specifically, it is an aesthetic encounter that exemplifies what Michael Fried calls the "theatrical relation" between the viewer and the art object: a staged confrontation in which the beholder finds his own glance returned by the represented figure.[15] Yet, what makes this moment even more theatrical is that it has been arranged by and for the Duke, whose voyeuristic pleasure in watching it unfold (again and again) turns the act of viewing itself into a spectacle, a spectacle that continually confirms for him his control over this symbolic economy of glances.

The Duke's lack of control over the "looks" of the living woman points to "how such a glance" as the Duchess's ended up framed on a wall. In life, the Duchess had autonomy over her glances, an autonomy which the Duke felt was dangerously undiscriminating: "she liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (23-24). This promiscuity of the female gaze menaces the Duke because it threatens to turn against him those very powers with which his own gendered theory of aesthetics invested it. It is his relentless aestheticization of the Duchess's "looks"—his tendency to see her "glance" as an object of beauty in itself, prized primarily because it retroactively confirms the value of what evokes it—that creates the crisis of referentiality he refers to when he complains that to her "'t was all one!" When her "looks"—in which he feels a proprietary interest and which he views as a projection and embodiment of his own worth—can be freely bestowed, then to his mind, her equanimity of feeling and expression when contemplating the gift of "his favor at her breast," when looking at a sunset, when receiving a bough of cherries, or when riding

[15] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) xii.

her mule conjoins these various impressions as objects of similar value.[16] By allowing "all and each" to "draw from her alike" the same response, the Duchess unwittingly aligns the Duke's person and his "nine-hundred-years-old name" with these lesser objects, a degradation that seems to him a form of infidelity. The Duke's interpretation suggests the degree to which he feels himself the master not just of his wife's physical body but also of its symbolic potential. His "disgust" at her unrestrained responsiveness is motivated by an egotism murderous in its willingness to inflict violence to achieve its ends and monstrous in its fundamental belief that the world exists merely to reflect and substantiate its own system of beliefs.

Of course, just what actually happened to the Duke's "last Duchess" remains tantalizingly obscure; Browning's speaker only tells his guest that, choosing "[n]ever to stoop," he handled the situation thus neatly: "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands / As if alive" (45-47). In the small space between concluding his narrative and redirecting his guest's attention to the portrait itself, the Duke perpetrates on the level of language the act of violence that the reader can never be sure he committed in reality. Shifting the focus back from the (once?) living original to her lifelike copy, he simulates the process by which he contained the dangerously unstable signifier that was his wife within the confines of the frame. Literally transformed into an aesthetic object, she is stripped of all past associations and, as an item in Duke's collection, she now exists in a manner acceptable to him: as a testament to his personal and monetary value as well as his exquisite taste in art. Also, by sequestering the representation of the Duchess behind a curtain except for those instances in which he chooses to unveil her, the Duke is able to control her

[16] Browning communicates here the force of his speaker's disgust through the disjunction between the line breaks and the syntactical breaks, and in the end rhyming of "fool" and "mule," underscoring the absurdity of the comparison (as the speaker sees it). Also, the fact that he considers natural phenomena, such as "the dropping of the daylight in the West" to be of less importance than himself aligns him with an aesthete more along the lines of a Gilbert Osmond than an Edmund Burke.

glance in a way that formerly eluded him. The Duchess' looks no longer go everywhere; she is now neither to look nor be looked on, except by his express arrangement. Safely mounted on the wall, the Duchess is the pure projection of the Duke's imagined superiority, and her enigmatic glance—finally, for him, channeled in the one, right direction—the reflection of how he sees himself.

An allegory of a particular kind of aestheticism, "My Last Duchess" depicts the aesthetic relation (as understood by the poem's speaker) as an extended campaign for dominance; the Duke plays the role of aesthete-as-sadist, a viewer whose pleasure in the art object is located mostly in his ruthless suppression of all meanings potentially contradictory to his own interpretation. That the Duke's aestheticizing gaze is not confined simply to the world of art makes his particular mode of perception all the more sinister, and the implied parallels between the behaviors of the Duke-as-art lover and the Duke-as-husband suggest that degree to which the former role is also (albeit in a different way) gendered.[17] The Duke exemplifies a certain masculinist ideal of viewership, one in which the viewer strives to prove himself through his ability to contain and situate the disruptive feminine art object in such a way that it serves as the refined manifestation of the system of values on which his superiority of vision depends. "My Last Duchess" attests to the brute force of the Duke's perceptual performance, but it is a force—as the cynically dismissive tone of the portrait never fails to remind us—that comes at the expense of the aesthetic object itself.

Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh offers the reader a very different model of aesthetic reception, but, I would argue, her representation of Aurora's formative engagement with her mother's portrait nevertheless shares with Browning's poem its anxious preoccupation with the way in which the art object has the potential to gaze

[17] One more example of the conflation between aesthetic and social registers: the Duke's final comments to his guest, when he asserts that "[t]he Count your master's known munificence" is not his primary goal in courting his new bride-to-be; rather it is "his daughter's fair self, as I avowed / At starting, is my *object*" (49-52, emphasis mine).

back at the viewer. The difference, though, lies in the source of anxiety. Whereas the Duke is unnerved by the painting's ability to *possess* a meaning other than the one he gave it, Aurora is reluctantly attracted to its ability to *bestow* meaning, particularly on the viewer. As previously mentioned, Aurora's description of her mother's portrait is comprised of a rapidly proliferating list of associations, the painting being a reflection of whatever she "last read or heard or dreamed" (147). The form of the list itself reflects Aurora's mental development, as the way in which she sees the painting becomes increasingly sophisticated over the course of the passage, presumably as she grows older. She begins by associating the painting with sensations (of the "Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful, / Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque"); then abstract emotions ("Hates, fears, and admirations"); then imaginary and magical creatures ("Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite"); and finally, a series of mythological and literary figures:

> A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
> A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
> A still Medusa with mild milky brows
> All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes. (153-158)

The structure of these lines signals a very specific moment in the development of Aurora's aesthetic faculties. This anaphoric sequence—the only one in the entire list—offers three distinct imaginative interpretations of the same image, all syntactically parallel to one other. They are also thematically analogous, in that each casts the mother as a figure from Greek mythology: a dauntless Muse, a loving Psyche, and a still Medusa. The image of the mother thus is imbued with an aura of the supernatural, associated with a lost, mythical world, to which, by virtue of her name, Aurora is also linked. There is yet one more important similarity; in all three of these mythological scenarios, Aurora imagines the figure in the painting engaged in the same activity that she is: looking. In the first two cases, this looking is made

explicit; the mother is imagined both as a Muse "eye[ing]" one of the Fates and Psyche "los[ing] sight" Love. In the third, though the chosen object of the gaze is not named, Aurora's identification of her mother with Medusa locates the image's power in its transformative "look" (i.e. appearance). Whether goddess, princess, or monster, the mother is described not simply as looking; she is looking at (or for) something.

However, since the portrait does not include the object of mother's gaze, Aurora's descriptive tableaus do not directly correspond to the painting she herself is viewing. In fact, her readings of the portrait only make sense, one realizes, if they are understood to represent not the painted image itself but rather the relation between the painted image and another figure located somewhere beyond the frame. By virtue of being placed opposite the picture, the position of this other figure is, by default, occupied by the viewer herself. Thus, Aurora, while viewing her mother's portrait and imagining the represented figure as these three different types of female viewers, is simultaneously placing herself in the role of the feminized viewed object. Moreover, the mythological scenarios that she reads into the painting all depict the represented gaze that binds subject to object as volatile and symbolically charged. In the first verbal picture, in which Aurora imagines her mother as a "dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate," the act of "eye[ing]" is invested with a certain confrontational energy. The mother-as-Muse (the anthropomorphized embodiment of a particular form of artistic expression) is deemed dauntless for looking upon a dreadful Fate (the similarly anthropomorphized embodiment of destiny), whose place is currently filled by her daughter. When Aurora next transforms her mother into "a loving Psyche who loses sight of Love," she also draws attention to the ocular tie that binds them; Psyche, etymologically the personification of the soul or animating "breeze" that enlivens the material world, is visually searching to reconnect with "Love" or Eros, the personification of bodily desire. The soul's relation to the body is thus conflated with

the painted image's relation to its viewer, the bond between them a mutual reflection of a desire for reunion.[18] And, finally, when Aurora envisions her mother as Medusa, whose apotropaic visage demands that the viewer not face her directly, she creates a situation in which the act of viewing is itself bound up with the danger of literal objectification. To see in her mother's image a mythological monster "with mild milky brows / All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes" and to violate the prohibition against viewing it in an unmediated fashion, Aurora places herself in the role of Medusa's victim who, as the recipient of her deadly gaze, will be turned into a piece of statuary.

Though the list of Aurora's imaginative encounters with her mother's picture continues beyond the Medusa image and includes comparisons to the Virgin Mary and Keats's Lamia, it is in these first three analogies that Barrett Browning distills what is essential and defining about her speaker's burgeoning aesthetic sensibility. Aurora shares with Browning's Duke an obsession with the significatory potential of the aesthetic object's represented and representing gaze, but she exemplifies a very different process of perception in the form that this obsession takes. Whereas Browning depicted the Duke's engagement with his wife's portrait as an extensive effort to impose a single perspective (and a single meaning) on the aesthetic object, Barrett Browning demonstrates through Aurora's meditation on her mother's portrait a conception of the aesthetic relation as a concatenation of reciprocal, replicating and, mutually-defining glances. It is with the first three mythic tableaus that she makes explicit this conception, using anaphora to link together and to underscore the parallel nature of these scenarios. Aurora reads into each one a mini-allegory, one which involves archetypal feminine figures often associated with various generative and

[18] That in the actual myth, Eros remains un-seeable until Psyche has gone through a series of trials in order to prove herself worthy of viewing him adds an interesting dimension to this line, one that could be explored further.

destructive energies that influence emotions, perception, and artistic production. These symbolic scenes all hinge upon an imagined moment of visual confrontation, a meeting-of-glances that promises (or threatens) to be in some way transformative.

By attributing the power of sight to the mythic female characters with which she associates her mother's image, Aurora creates a situation that destabilizes the characteristic dynamic between subject and object. Rather than an act of projection (in which the aesthetic relation is defined by the subject gazing upon the object), Aurora imagines instead an act of reflection, in which the painted image also looks back at the viewer, a viewer who is as much defined by the represented gaze as she defines it and who, in looking, also sees a reflection of herself. This alternative mode of aesthetic perception, as it is here outlined in Aurora's formative experience with her mother's portrait, contrasts with the one offered in Browning's "My Last Duchess." Yet, like "My Last Duchess," *Aurora Leigh* acknowledges the seminal role of gender in the experience of viewership, and it strives to represent the way in which the gendering of aesthetic categories predetermines the female viewer's relation to the art object. As the final lines of Aurora's description suggest, her extended experience of her mother's portrait can be boiled down to an ongoing process of mirroring, in which all the "images" of different archetypal feminine figures encountered in what she "last read or heard or dreamed" "[c]oncentred on the picture, glassed themselves / Before [her] meditative childhood" (169-170). The mother's portrait becomes a composite image of multiple viewings and multiple associations, in which Aurora sees reflected a variety of potential and contradictory models. By continually reimagining the same represented female figure in a variety of different archetypal roles, Aurora's monologue reproduces, in the form of an individual narrative, a cultural history characterized by the ongoing embodiment of various energies, sensations and ideas in a host of more-or-less interchangeable feminine forms. The outcome of this

experiment is that Barrett Browning maps out for the reader—significantly, from a feminine perspective—the circuitous route by which personal and cultural experiences come to inform and to shape even the most uninformed of aesthetic impressions. Offsetting this blueprint for female viewership with Browning's masculine model, it is now possible to begin to interrogate the complicated social and gender dynamics that underpin nineteenth-century narrative representations of aesthetic experience, in which the viewer is no longer just a voice and a disembodied perspective, but also an actor in a drama, performing the act of perception for the scrutiny of other characters and also for the reader.

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In his "Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author," the Earl of Shaftesbury describes the soliloquy as "the business of self-dissection," a form of expression whose origin can be traced back to ancient Greece, to "that celebrated Delphic inscription, 'Recognize yourself!' which is as much as to say, 'Divide yourself!' or 'Be two!'"[19] Though the narrativized aesthetic encounter is unlike the dramatic soliloquy insofar as the characters involved are rarely moved to deliver crafted, self-revealing speeches, both are scenes that function as interludes or pauses in the action, temporarily unsettling the objective flow of events by focusing on a character's subjective reflections. Though the fictional viewer in the scene of aesthetic encounter does not always directly acknowledge the presence of an audience, that character, like the soliloquizer, is nevertheless involved in the "business of self-dissection," scrutinizing not just the object of art but also the sensory response that the object has evoked. Thus, the aesthetic encounter also involves an act of self-division and self-recognition, in which the viewer becomes conscious of him- or herself in and through the performance of aesthetic contemplation.

[19] Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury (Earl of), *Characteristics of Men. Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. John M. Robinson, vol. 1 (London: Grant Richards, 1900) 72, 77.

This dissertation considers a variety of such narrative moments, with the intention of exploring what such moments tell us about nineteenth-century projects of culture-formation. The first three chapters take as their organizing paradigm the role that social conventions of gender played in theories and narratives of aesthetic experience. As feminist critics such as Caroline Korsmeyer have noted, the typical figuration of the subject-object relation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic philosophy was that of the masculine viewer to the feminized art object. The "feminine" was also often invoked as the manifestation or embodiment of androcentric ideas or principles, such as the female body standing in for the male spirit or soul. In chapter one, I read Algernon Swinburne's *Note on Charlotte Brontë* with an eye towards how these gendered aesthetic concepts underlie and inform his assessment of female "genius," as it is embodied in the twin forms of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. In chapters two and three, I then consider how Brontë and Eliot, in their novels *Villette* and *Middlemarch*, anticipate and challenge the objectifying masculine gaze in their fictional representations of aesthetic encounters involving female viewers that take place in the symbolically-charged space of the museum. In each case, I am interested in the representation of museum or gallery space and the way in which these female authors use its aestheticizing function (aestheticizing insofar as it is a space that is constructed for acts of perception and judgment) in order to illuminate and interrogate the gendered dynamics of viewership. The museum—a public space created for private acts of contemplation and valuation—proves to be a fertile ground in both of these texts for the staging of both aesthetic and social encounters and for the juxtaposition and complication of these homologous relations.

The second section of the dissertation develops this interest in the social scene of viewership but expands the focus beyond the space of the museum and uses other analytic lenses besides that of gender. Considering the relation between aesthetics and

sociality more broadly, these chapters look not at sections of novels but at entire works, bringing to the fore questions of genre, in particular the question of how the narrativizing of aesthetic experience impacted the form and structure of these texts and the representational methods used by their authors. In chapter four, I take as my subject a collection of short narrative sketches that in its very title announces a preoccupation with art culture and its effects: Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*. Fascinated with the transitoriness and insubstantiality of aesthetic experience, the *Portraits* all are dreams of space, both of actual spaces that inspire in the subject strong sensations and of imaginary spaces created by the mind as outlets for various fancies, desires, and memories. They are also allegories of aesthetic development, personal and cultural coming-of-age stories that strive to ground and to map certain sensations by linking them to previous sensations that are, in turn, connected to the place in which they were first felt and consciously registered. I argue that the prototype for the sensitive and doomed youth that populate the *Imaginary Portraits* is a young Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the subject of Pater's first published essay. For Pater, Coleridge was a harbinger and conduit for the Romantic revival of interest in the idea of animate and animating Nature, one in whom "the old Greek conception like some seed has taken root and sprung up anew." Similarly, the subjects of the *Portraits* are all young men in whom an aesthetic awakening coincides with the flowering of their respective cultures, and in these narratives Pater explores the relation between internal and external landscapes in order to suggest the various ways in which aesthetic subjects can function as mediums or instruments for cultural rebirth through the often tragic spectacle of their perceptual performances.

Chapters five and six provide yet another angle on Victorian art culture, a transatlantic view as it were, in that both concern American authors whose narratives exchange "the coldness, the thinness, the blankness" of their native country for "the

richer, denser, warmer European spectacle."[20] Taking the aesthetic encounter "abroad," I read Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* as examples of the long reach of aestheticism in the nineteenth century. Both novels are concerned with the intricate web of unspoken bonds and secret allegiances that connect a quartet of art-loving expatriates in Rome, and in each, aesthetic encounters with aspects of the Roman spectacle serve to elicit visceral responses that double as unwilling disclosures, bringing to the surface truths that the characters would rather keep hidden. In *The Marble Faun,* art functions as a kind of hieroglyphic writing. The major mysteries that propel the plot find their always-partial revelation in works of art as they are seen and created by the novel's major characters. For Hawthorne, every act of aesthetic perception has immediate and long-term social ramifications, in the form of complicity, through which the shared experience of art provokes viewers to understand themselves as moral agents, even as they are mere observers.

Though not as strictly concerned with art works as Hawthorne's novel, James's *The Portrait of a Lady* shares with its predecessor an obsession with "how things look"—which can mean both what one sees and how one is seen. James's novel, though, replaces the statues, paintings and drawings that, in previous texts, serve as the necessary prerequisites for the narrativizing of aesthetic experience with something no less carefully sculpted and shaded: the social context in which viewership takes place. *The Portrait of a Lady* represents culture as an art in itself, a matrix of social forms and values that, in special moments, can be evaluated *as though* it were a precious artifact. Introducing my reading of the novel with an analysis of James's 1877 review of the paintings of Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones and his 1908 Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, I use these two texts to frame (both thematically and temporally)

[20] Henry James, *Hawthorne* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, [1967]) 34.

the novel, highlighting how James shifts the focus of the aesthetic encounter from what the character sees to the aesthetic qualities of that character's act of seeing. In his heroine's application of the interpretative strategies usually utilized in the contemplation of art objects to every-day scenes in which she is both an actor and an audience, James draws attention to the aesthetic qualities of the social scripts that govern nineteenth-century culture. This change in emphasis—from the social aspect of aesthetic encounters to the aesthetic aspect of social encounters—offers an intriguing opportunity for considering the central issues of this dissertation from yet another perspective, as James evaluates the aesthetic era with the critical eye of one whose youthful apprenticeship in the period's "immensities" has given him the means of turning the self-reflexivity of the aesthetic encounter back on itself, exposing the situatedness of this mode of literary representation within the cultural milieu which gave it birth.

As a means of joining the beginning and end of this dissertation, I conclude this introduction with another passage from *The Middle Years*, an anecdote James tells concerning an especially memorable visit to the National Gallery shortly after his arrival in England. Standing before Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, James finds himself in close proximity to one of the more controversial of the period's literary personalities, the irrepressibly perverse Algernon Swinburne:

> *What* a composition, for instance again I am capable at this hour of exclaiming, the conditions of felicity in which I became aware, one afternoon during a renewed gape before the Bacchus and Ariadne, first that a little gentleman beside me and talking with the greatest vivacity to another gentleman was extremely remarkable, second that he had the largest and most *chevelu* [hairy] auburn head I had ever seen perched on a scarce perceptible body, third that I held some scrap of a clue to his identity, which couldn't fail to be eminent, fourth that this tag of association was with nothing less than a small photograph sent me westward across the sea a few months earlier, and fifth that the sitter for the photograph had been the author of *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Poems and Ballads*! I thrilled, it perfectly comes back to me, with the prodigy of circumstance that I should be admiring Titian in the same breath

> with Mr. Swinburne—that is in the same breath in which he admired Titian and in which I also admired him, the whole constituting on the spot between us, for appreciation, that is for mine, a fact of intercourse, such a fact as could stamp and colour the whole passage ineffaceably, and this even though the more illustrious party to it had within the minute turned off and left me shaken. I was shaken, but I was satisfied—that was the point; I didn't ask more to interweave another touch in my pattern, and as I once more gather in the impression, I am struck with my having deserved truly as many of the like as possible.[21]

This passage provides a vivid example of what, in the texts studied in this dissertation, I call the scene of aesthetic encounter. More to the point, James's anecdote works to anatomize this moment, explaining what gave it such a deep "stamp" and a vivid "colour" by listing the "conditions of felicity" that made it possible for him to be "aware" of it. First, there is the significance of the painting itself; among the most celebrated of the National Gallery's acquisitions, the *Bacchus and Ariadne* is mentioned by Ruskin in *Modern Painter* as his second most-valued object in the collection. Though James does not describe the painting, the scene it depicts—the abandoned Ariadne approached by Bacchus and a troop of satyrs, maenads, and, memorably, a pair of leopards—presents an implicit but identifiable (to a properly acculturated reader) analogue to the scene in which James is involved, as he is too is receiving a visitation of sorts by the closest thing to a Dionysian figure that Victorian England had to offer. Much in the same spirit of Foucault's *Las Meninas,* Titian's painting in James's anecdote is presented as an "entire picture . . . looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene."[22] Then, there is the chain of circumstances that leads to James recognizing the identity of his viewing partner; the "little gentleman" next to him is himself remarkable, owing to his wild red hair, and, this detail drawing his attention, James is able to compare the figure before him to a photograph of the poet he had previously been sent, that photograph having been in demand because of

[21] *The Middle Years* 51-52.
[22] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002) 15.

the notoriety that followed the publication of Swinburne's "Poems and Ballads." And, finally, there is the "thrill" that this experience generates in the young James, a thrill stemming from the "prodigy of circumstance" that finds him "admiring Titian in the same breath with Mr. Swinburne—that is in the same breath in which he admired Titian and in which [James] also admired him."

Though James remains vague on the nature of this "thrill," he does convey that that emotional charge he receives is rooted in a sense of intimacy, in the awareness that he and Swinburne are admiring Titian in the same breath, this shared visual relation "constituting on the spot between [them], for appreciation . . . a fact of intercourse." A moment alive with erotic, aspirational, even potentially rivalrous impulses, James's interaction with Swinburne depends on the mediation of the *Bacchus and Ariadne,* which functions as a focal point and a site of projection. The painting is the literal "spot" in which their directed gazes converge, but, for James, it also offers an imaginary space in which there exists the possibility of wordless connection with another person. That Swinburne remains unconscious of his own involvement in this "fact of intercourse" does not lessen its impact for James, as his thrill does not depend on public acknowledgment. Rather, it is James's private satisfaction in the aesthetic qualities of his encounter, the compositionality of the scene, that makes it valuable to him. Also, one speculates, that James knows himself to be alone in his "appreciation" might even have been part of the thrill, as it signals his own responsiveness to such moments, proving the existence of aesthetic faculties on par with those of the eminent Swinburne. In any case, as his concluding flourish suggests, his younger self's ability to aesthetically appreciate not just the painting but the social circumstances of the scene, offers, to his mind, proof of a receptive sensibility, one that "deserved truly as many of the like [impressions] as possible."

From the retrospective viewpoint of the autobiographer, James "gather[s] in" the various strands of his past "impression" and weaves them into a narrative "pattern," a pattern that reveals the social aspect of aesthetic observation. James's anecdote shares with the other works studied in this dissertation an insistence that one of the most crucial features of aesthetic experience is the way in which it makes the individual more aware of his society, more discerning of the values and beliefs on which it is founded, and more sympathetic towards its other members. By narrativizing the aesthetic encounter, the authors of these texts strive to represent the acculturating process which, in the nineteenth century, offered one small but important consolation in a world unsettled by numerous economic, social, and epistemological upheavals. In and through aesthetic observation, the individual can recapture the feeling of being part of a harmonious, organic whole, bound to a particular milieu and the other people in it through a network of relations otherwise too subtle to be apprehended. The tireless pursuit of this experience in Victorian culture and literature speaks to the pervasive perception of its necessity and to a wide-spread belief that, as Walter Pater says in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, "[n]ot to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the brilliance of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways in, is on this short night of frost and sun, to sleep before evening."[23]

[23] *The Renaissance* 85-86.

CHAPTER 1.

"No Living English or Female Writer": Gender in the Critical Reception of the Fiction of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot

How might gender affect narratives of aesthetic encounter? In subsequent chapters, I will look at novels by Charlotte Brontë as well as George Eliot, with an eye towards how the representation of characters acting and interacting in museums and galleries (spaces designated for perceptual contemplation) allow the authors to stage and subvert the implicit gendering of such experiences. Here, however, I begin by analyzing a piece of criticism that compares Brontë and Eliot, as authors as well as women, with the intention of exploring how the language of aesthetics employs certain gendered binaries in its formulation of hierarchies of taste and judgment, binaries that put the female author as much on display as the works she creates.

In 1877, a panegyric entitled "A Note on Charlotte Brontë" tasks itself with defending what it sees as Brontë's rightful place among the select cadre of women writers who "for England [are] of highest female fame." Lest that designation seem too elevated or too broad, the author goes on to qualify his statement:

> But, without putting in a claim for the author of 'Jane Eyre' as qualified to ascend the height on which a minority of not overwise admirers would fain enthrone a demigoddess of more dubious divinity than hers, I must take leave to reiterate my conviction that no living English or female writer can rationally be held her equal in what I cannot but regard as the highest and the rarest quality which supplies the hardest and the surest proof of a great and absolute genius for the painting and the handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction. (12)[24]

That the author of this essay is the pre-Raphaelite Algernon Swinburne might come as something of a surprise, not because of its style, which is every bit as highly-wrought

[24] Algernon Swinburne, *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1877). All subsequent citations are to this edition.

and alliterative as the most devoted of Swinburne's fans could wish, but because of the comparative meagerness of the laurels it demands for (and grants) its subject. Though typically not an artist or critic given to narrow specifications, Swinburne's support of Brontë is markedly circumscribed. Brontë is not an "absolute genius" but rather an absolute genius of a very particular sort. Moreover, her genius is proof not simply of itself but also of the falsity of the genius often attributed to that "demigoddess of a more dubious divinity than hers"—George Eliot.

It is this secondary goal of Swinburne's analysis of Charlotte Brontë to which I seek to draw attention. This early assertion is only the first in a series of comparisons that pit Brontë against Eliot in order to challenge those who would place Eliot on the level of Shakespeare. Swinburne's aim is not to replace Eliot with Brontë but instead to show how Brontë's genius "for the painting and the handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction" is "in this single point" equal to Shakespeare's and how, as there is "no living English or female writer" who is Brontë's equal in this respect, George Eliot cannot possibly be considered part of the exalted company in which some would group her (17). It is also worth noting that when Swinburne compares Brontë to all "living English or female writer[s]," he syntactically draws a line in the sand that traces through the rest of the essay. The antithesis that results from the inclusion of one seemingly inoffensive "or"—"living English" *or* "female"—creates a two-tiered system of evaluation: in one category all living English writers (Swinburne limiting himself to one side of the Atlantic), in the other all female writers, presumably both the living and the dead. What is strange about this distinction is that, for Swinburne's purposes, it is an ostensibly unnecessary one. George Eliot fits into both categories, being both a living English *and* a female author. But, if we consider that by belonging to each group, Eliot is, in fact, doubly excluded, it becomes clear how these systems of categorization can work to unseat those that it

might seem to place. Eliot, in straddling the divide, is put in a liminal position, both everywhere and nowhere, a part of both strata but fully included in neither.

Clearly framing his "Note" as a *re*evaluation of Brontë, Swinburne contributes to an ongoing debate about women writers and, in the process, underscores the prominence of gender in shaping Victorian aesthetics and literary evaluation. But "A Note on Charlotte Brontë" does not announce itself as being concerned with the issue of gender. Swinburne claims simply "to express in turn his own agreement" with the claim that Brontë's work is the product of "exceptional intellectual power." Yet, for Swinburne, the excellence of Brontë's writing evidences more than itself; it also provides a necessary contrast to the work of "some few at least among the female immortals of whom the happy present hour is so more than seasonally prolific" (3). *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, he goes on to say, will continue "to be read with delight and wonder and re-read with reverence and admiration, when darkness everlasting has long since fallen upon all human memory of their cheap scientific, their vulgar erotic, and their voluminous domestic schools." Swinburne's distinction here—between Charlotte Brontë, a woman who writes literature, and her unnamed rivals, women who write *women's* literature—implies that only by abandoning the generic "schools" that cater to predominantly female writers and readers can the authoress aspire to lasting literary fame.

George Eliot satirized these same "schools" in the 1856 *Westminster Review* article "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." In Eliot's case, though, her condemnation of this novelistic "genus with many species" emphasizes how the models of feminine behavior celebrated in these texts are both unrealistic and unnatural, particularly in their insistence on the correlation between the heroine's outward and inward attributes: "[h]er eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb *contralto* and a superb

intellect; she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues" (442).[25] Eliot condemns these novels *by* women *for* women as tools of social indoctrination, encouraging their female readers to participate in their own objectification by promoting the idea that their attainments are only valuable as objects of admiration. More perniciously, these productions of "feminine fatuity" only reassures those men who mistake socially-constructed conventions of the gender for natural characteristics of the sex, and justify them in believing the female mind "too shallow and feeble a soil to bear much tillage . . . only fit for the very lightest crops" (442). In other words, these texts create the gendered frames by which they are later judged, and by offering a shallow and artificial picture of the female imagination at work, they perpetuate the myth that woman's scope of observation is itself innately superficial.

Eliot thus anticipates the sort of critique that Swinburne makes twenty-odd years later in his dismissal of those "female immortals" and their preposterous "schools." Swinburne's argument does borrow that gendering frame that Eliot sees these texts as providing, even in the language that it employs. Though nothing that he says is explicitly about femininity, what makes his above-mentioned comparison *gendered* is that it persistently elides the distinction between the authors themselves and the works they produce, using images and rhetorical flourishes that evoke the bodies of the authors, who, in this instance, all happen to be female. From its opening description (which rather ironically employs the gardening metaphor that Eliot imagined male critics using), in which women writers are compared to a bumper crop

[25] George Eliot, "Silly Novels by Lady-Novelists," *Westminster Review* LXVI (October 1856). One should also note that Eliot's critique has as much to do with class as it does with gender. Dismissing these novels as by "Lady-Novelists," she makes the argument that these women write not because of talent or financial necessity but from vanity and an excess of leisure time. The worlds that they depict are therefore representative of their sheltered lifestyle: "The fair writers have evidently never talked to a tradesman except from a carriage window; they have no notion of the working-classes except as 'dependents'; they think five hundred a-year a miserable pittance."

of questionable merit, growing wild in the overly fertile soil of an increasingly "literate"—as opposed to "literary"—public, this critique borrows from and reinforces certain conventional ideas of femininity and images associated with the feminine. At the same time, it also polices the boundary between masculine and feminine through a complex strategy of objectification. Swinburne addresses both the women to whom he is comparing Charlotte Brontë and their works from a distanced and distinctly masculine perspective. His mock-heroic depiction of them as "female immortals" blessing "the happy present hour" mimics the courtship language of a devoted swain, presumably to suggest that those who would give them such praise are similarly impartial.

And when their clay feet are revealed through Brontë's superiority (their immortality proven to be mortal, all too mortal), Swinburne shifts tactics and openly belittles their efforts in fiction by using subtly gendered insinuations. Each of these adjectives serves a particular function, revealing what might otherwise be mistaken to be authentically scientific, erotic or domestic as only a showy imitation of the real thing. Feminine attempts at "scientific" prose are deemed "cheap," "erotic" prose "vulgar," and "domestic" prose "voluminous." "Cheap," "erotic," and "vulgar" are not intrinsically gendered terms, but there is a world of difference between calling a man and a woman "cheap." A man who is "cheap" is reluctant to spend money; a "cheap" woman is a sub-par commodity, dressing and acting in way that justifies her being held in little regard by society. Taken together, Swinburne's pronouncements on these "schools" of literature read like condemnations of women exposing themselves in public, suggesting that they are rendering themselves the objects of ridicule by ignoring the boundaries between masculine and feminine spheres of influence. On the one hand, by making two qualities deemed properly feminine defining features of particular types of women's fiction, they are represented as

transforming those supposedly inherent qualities into excessive and tasteless performances, of domesticity and sensuousness, respectively. At the same time, their attempts to display competence in prose that incorporates the masculine realm of science are seen as contemptibly substandard. In both cases, the standards by which Swinburne assesses these literary schools are revealed to be bound up with normative ideas of gender.

In Swinburne's judgments of Brontë, Eliot, and their cohort, gender does not simply influence but also infiltrates and, ultimately, skews his argument, revealing how the literary and aesthetic criticism of the period was built on a foundation of what philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer calls "gendered concept[s]." Korsmeyer defines a "gendered concept" as

> Some basic term used in philosophy and art theory [which appears] to be generic or neutral; that is, it appears to refer to general human nature or to artists without regard to whether they are male or female. However, a gendered concept is one where there is a hidden skew in connotation or import, such that the idea in question pertains most centrally to males, or in certain cases to females. (3)[26]

Perhaps the most fundamental of these gendered concepts is the relation between the viewer and the object being perceived—to use the terminology of Gerard Genette, "the aesthetic relation."[27] That the "aesthetic relation" can be productively read in terms of gender is something that critics like Laura Mulvey have argued for through their work on the visual arts and the "male gaze." To summarize their claims, the history of Western art is organized around the idea of a masculine viewership, and whether the ideal object of contemplation is nature (Kant) or the art object (Hegel), that object is,

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[26] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[27] To call it *the* aesthetic relation obviously prioritizes this one aspect of aesthetic theory over all others. But, when one considers that with Kant and Burke, aesthetics became something of a subjectivist enterprise (focusing primarily on the sensations of the observer), placing the emphasis on the *relation between* the subject and object signals the shift from aesthetics as a theoretical science of taste to an experimental science of experience.

by virtue of the desiring gaze of its intended audience, feminized. Of course, their arguments are so suggestive precisely because that they are founded on large, generalizing claims, and the critical framework their work provides can, at times, obscure how gender plays important, if less obvious, roles in aesthetic discourse. Still, the basic concept of a gendered aesthetic relation does offer one way of understanding why theories of aesthetics rely so heavily on systems of stratification to explain and rank different types of subjective experiences. The feminized art object, seen as the manifestation or embodiment of various androcentric ideals and principles, is evaluated on the basis of its expression of traits which are themselves, in varying degrees, understood in terms of gender. Most of the time, these traits are organized in terms of hierarchical, gendered binaries, such as the division between "the sublime" and "the beautiful." To paraphrase Edmund Burke, "the beautiful," being associated with the feminine, is founded on the idea of pleasure; beautiful objects, therefore, are typically small, smooth and polished, light, delicate and uncomplicated, capable of arousing a sense of appreciation and enjoyment. "The sublime," being in the province of the masculine, is instead "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger . . . operat[ing] in a manner analogous to terror"; its objects are vast in dimension, rugged, dark, gloomy, massive and mysterious (157, 86).[28]

Lest these two categories be understood as separate but equal, Burke goes on to argue that the sublime "is productive of the *strongest* [emphasis mine] emotion which the mind is capable of feeling," the strongest insofar as

> the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure . . . the torments which we may be made to suffer are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body could enjoy. (86)

[28] Edmund Burke. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Part III, Sections VII and XXVII, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

Burke's distinction between the sublime and the beautiful turns on the issue of capacity. The sublime, evoking the strongest human emotion, terror, has a more powerful effect on the observer than that of the beautiful and thus, implicitly, requires from that observer a correspondingly stronger and more powerful "body and mind" capable of withstanding the experience. Also, as, for Burke, this fear of physical pain is rooted ultimately in the fear of death, an awareness of the sublime demands from the observer the ability to fathom a state beyond sensation, beyond the body. The sublime, which breaks in upon the consciousness of the observer through a recognition of how the body may be acted upon by the outside world, is granted a kind of objective, autonomous existence by virtue of this association with pain and death, death (obviously) putting the individual beyond the possibility of feeling, and pain, in the words of Elaine Scarry, so overwhelming the consciousness and senses of the individual that it is "unshareabl[e]" and ultimately "resistan[t] to language" and representation (4).[29] The effect of the beautiful, in contrast, must always be less than the sublime in that it is bounded by what the body is capable of sensibly registering. The beautiful is a more limited (and limiting) experience because, even with "the most sound and exquisitely sensible body," there is only so much that it *can* enjoy. Perhaps the reason for this limitation lies in the fact that (as Burke here formulates it) the experience of the beautiful is something courted and cultivated, possibly even created, by the individual, whereas the experience of the sublime arises unbidden from the individual's proximity to objects and ideas terrible and awe-inspiring. That Burke describes the definitive experience of the beautiful as something envisioned by "the most learned voluptuary" or the "liveliest imagination" is telling in that it designates the beautiful as that which embodies the sensual as well as aesthetic appetites of an individual (or a culture). To deem the learned voluptuary—one who has studied the

[29] Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985).

myriad methods by which bodily desires may be satisfied—the most able to exemplify the beautiful is to associate (albeit indirectly) this aesthetic experience with its sexual counterpart, both being acts that center on some sort of gratification. Similarly, to represent the body most able to enjoy the beautiful as the "most sound and exquisitely sensible" is to focus on its own physicality in a way that eroticizes it and puts it on display.

Thus, though Burke's conceptions of the sublime and the beautiful, respectively, depend on his extended comparison of them as related aesthetic states, as experiences they are hardly comparable. They are fitted for different types of observers, different types of sensibilities, and it is not too much to claim that the experience of the sublime (in addition the objects that inspire it) is coded as masculine and the experience of the beautiful as feminine. Of course, Burke would not have said that women are more capable than men of apprehending the beautiful (except perhaps—I would speculate—insofar as they *are capable of being* beautiful and consequently might experience an element of recognition in their perception of beautiful objects that might make them more familiar). But, it is nevertheless the case that Burke's methods of differentiating between these two modes of aesthetic apprehension emphasize, in the case of the sublime, the forceful presence of the ideas and objects themselves and, in the beautiful, the delicate and sensitive body ready to receive the sensations that ideas and objects can produce. And, if Burke does not specifically address a female readership when describing the experience of the beautiful, he does remark that the "appearance of delicacy, and even of fragility . . . almost essential" to beautiful shapes and bodies has an "obvious" counterpart "in the case of the fair sex, whose timidity is a quality of mind analogous to it" (549-550).

This difference in focus informs other major conceptual binaries in the philosophy and literature of aesthetics. While probably few today would argue with

the claim that gender plays an important role in the representation of aesthetic objects, what could benefit from further interrogation is the way in which the gendering of categories, of varieties of experience, and of real and theoretical spaces informs the complex "rules of engagement" (as it were) that prescribe the aesthetic relation.[30] Especially in the nineteenth century, in which the socially-coded dynamics of viewership were becoming increasingly volatile (owing to broadening conceptions of what could be defined as "art," to the expansion and diversification of its audience, and—part and parcel with these two things—to the birth of modern museum culture), the fictional or analytic representation of a particular observer's relation to a particular object was also an argument in favor of or against a specific notion of cultural authenticity and authority. In addition to designating certain objects as rightfully "aesthetic" and certain observers as "aesthetes," these literary representations also served to establish the perspectives and modes of apprehension that united them as "aesthetical." When these aesthetical states are characterized in gendered terms, these terms implicitly position the unique vantage point of artist or aesthete within a social and moral order. It also cues the reader in to the ways in which this vantage point should itself be viewed.

Thus, when a writer like Swinburne appraises Charlotte Brontë by setting the *form* of her artistry against that of another famous female author, his opinion of "lady novelists" operates within and contributes to this gendered system of evaluation. Swinburne's article (which at roughly a hundred pages can hardly be considered a mere "note") relies heavily on the major conceptual binaries in the aesthetic and artistic theory of the period, at various points trotting out (in slightly altered forms) such mainstays as genius v. intelligence, imagination v. fancy, and poetic v. prosaic.

[30] In this case, when I say "aesthetic relation," I mean both real and fictional representations of the relation between the viewer and the object. Also, I intend for "viewer" to encompass both the passive observer and the active artist, though for Genette "the aesthetic relation" and the "artistic relation" are two different things.

Most of these binaries serve to distinguish the "quality" of Brontë's vision from that of Eliot's, and in the first ten pages, Swinburne cycles hectically through a number of comparative frameworks. The first substantial point of comparison is their methods of characterization, which Swinburne somewhat perversely anatomizes in their male characters, as the highest and best examples of what each woman is capable of imagining. For Eliot, Swinburne points to Adam Bede (the eponymous hero of that novel) and Tito Melema (*Romola*), and, for Brontë, Edward Rochester (*Jane Eyre*) and Paul Emanuel (*Villette*). He argues that "the inevitable test or touchstone of this indefinable difference is the immediate and enduring impression set at once and engraved for ever on the simplest or the subtlest mind of the most careless or the most careful student," and, with Swinburne himself serving as some incarnation of that student, the result of that test is that Brontë's male characters are "creations" and Eliot's are "construction[s]," the former being the province of "genius" and the latter of "intellect" (7).[31] This distinction, Swinburne continues, illustrates the difference between "the second" (Eliot) and "the third" (Brontë) classes of "imaginative work," the second class being "of *high enough* quality to engage our judgment in its service, and make direct demand on our grave attention for deliberate assent or dissent" while the third "in the exercise of its *highest* faculties at their best neither solicits nor seduces nor provokes us to acquiesce or demur, but compels us without question to positive acceptance and belief" (9, emphasis mine). According to this formulation, the marker of Brontë's genius is that her work dominates the reader, demanding conformation to its vision and forestalling any kind of critical gaze. Conversely, Eliot's fiction, the product of intellect, is in the considerably less powerful position of cajoling or seducing its reader, using its various wiles to win an approving evaluation.

[31] This seems to suggest Coleridge's distinction between Imagination and Fancy, the former being the power to bring something imaginatively into being, the latter being the ability to put already existing components into interesting combinations.

Like Burke's account of the sublime and the beautiful, Swinburne's distinction focuses on the aesthetic effect; it is in the relation between the subject and the object (in this case, the imagined reader of the women's writing and the creative force that that writing displays) that the essential difference between Brontë and Eliot can be registered.

Yet, after contending for the superiority of Brontë's genius over Eliot's intellect, Swinburne complicates the gendered hierarchy he has just set up through a series of elaborate concretizations, in which he envisions the creative faculties of both women using terms that constantly evoke (and contrast) the personalities and persons of the women themselves. Eliot's imagination is now lauded for its "large and liberal beneficence," its "wealth and depth of thoughtful and fruitful humor, of vital and various intelligence" and its "capacity for knowledge and culture," as is Brontë's for its "purity of passion," its "depth and ardour of feeling," its "spiritual force and fervour of forthright inspiration" (18-19).[32] Amid these compliments certain conventional lines are being drawn, which situate the two women within oppositional and gendered spheres of knowledge. Eliot's talents position her squarely within the masculine realm of the public intellectual, deeply involved with the culture of ideas.[33] Brontë's creative faculties are also celebrated for their "depth," but it is a depth associated with emotional—rather than intellectual—capacity, and with the feminine realm of private self-reflection. In this instance, though, the gendering of spaces has very different connotations in terms of what it suggests about the two women authors being compared. Even if Brontë is aligned with habits of mind deemed "feminine,"

[32] Vintage Swinburne, here, an almost overwhelming amount of alliteration

[33] It was fairly commonplace, especially toward the end of her career and in the years following her death, for critics and contemporaries to ascribe to George Eliot and her work a "masculine" quality. In one example, from a 1907 text called "References for Literary Workers," its author Henry Matson makes the following representative observation: "The genius and fame of George Eliot are identified chiefly with her novels. In these she shows the strength, comprehension, and originality of a mind more masculine than feminine" (335).

any limitation to her genius is still counterbalanced by the fact that her work is the purest and highest expression of this intuitive way of knowing the world. However, for Eliot, though Swinburne grandly grants that she may "claim precedence" over "all other illustrious women" in the aforementioned mental attributes, her triumph is still rather like that of a person gaining mastery of a foreign language (19). Though she may learn its basic rules, Swinburne implies, she will never have the same sort of fluency possessed by a native speaker.

Even if Swinburne's masculine descriptors for Eliot are common enough in the contemporary reception of her work (both admirers and detractors frequently made reference to her robust and strong-featured . . . intelligence), the effort that he puts forth in critically situating her (lower) in the literary stratosphere betrays a profound if undefined anxiety about the significance of her work and her legacy in the canon of English literature, an anxiety that seems rooted in her embodiment of a kind of un-feminine female creative intellect. He takes especial offense to the suggestion of certain unnamed critics that Eliot ("the author of *Adam Bede*) as well as Tennyson ("the author of *Queen Mary*") will someday be regarded as equals of Shakespeare.[34] As is typical of Swinburne, outrage takes the form of almost hysterically convoluted invective:

> Only in the eyes of such critics as these, or in the glassy substitutes which serve their singular kind as proxies for a human squint, will it seem to imply a want of serious interest and respect in the former direction, of loyal and grateful admiration in the latter, if I confess that to my unaided organs and

[34] Echoing his earlier discussion of Brontë and Eliot in terms of their male counterparts, his association of Eliot and Tennyson with works that are titled after the names of characters of the opposite sex seems deliberate, especially from a poet who was heartily interested in the figure of the hermaphrodite. In this case, Eliot might be seen to be masculinized by her association with Adam Bede and Tennyson femininized by his association with Queen Mary. Again, Swinburne is only following convention in this critical maneuver, but his preoccupation with gender-bending nevertheless reinforces a sort of latent discomfort (even if this discomfort might have been rooted in his own youthful subversiveness). On an unrelated note, the only definition that I've been able to find of the word "subsimious" (which is not in the OED) is from *The Century Dictionary* (1891), which defines it as "nearly simious or monkey-like" and the example provided is, tellingly, from the abovementioned quotation.

> limited capacities of sight the one comparison appears as portentously farcical as the other in its superhuman or subsimious absurdity; that I should find it as hard an article of religion to digest and assimilate into the body of a living faith, which bade me believe in the assumption of the goddess as that which bade me believe in the ascension of the god to complete the co-eternal and co-equal personality of English genius at its highest apogee, in its triune and bisexual apotheosis. (11-12)

In translation, Swinburne asserts that he is demonstrating no "want of serious interest and respect" towards Eliot or deficiency of "loyal and grateful admiration" towards Tennyson, if he pronounces the idea of either being the peer of Shakespeare as "portentously farcical" in the case of the former and as a "superhuman or subsimious absurdity" in that of the latter. The very notion that Eliot and Tennyson might someday occupy the rarified sphere of Shakespeare is enough for him to consider apostasy towards the "living faith" of English literature, as he flatly refuses to worship the god of "English genius" in this "triune and bisexual apotheosis." To distinguish between Eliot and Tennyson while lampooning both of them might seem counter-productive, but this dual-pronged strategy actually serves to refine his earlier critique of Eliot. By linking the female author of *Adam Bede* with the male author of *Queen Mary*, Swinburne makes the point that, if both of them are laughable as goddess and god of the literary heavens, part of what makes them so is their sexually-ambiguous and transgressive authorial personas. If Swinburne is granting the masculinized author of *Adam Bede* the "respect" a lady is due, and the feminized author of *Queen Mary* the amount of "admiration" due a brother poet, he nevertheless reminds us that both of them have themselves crossed those same gendered lines. Moreover, to put them in the same stratum as Shakespeare is to perform some strange sex-change operation on English genius, making it at once "triune" and "bisexual," destroying its previous masculine autonomy. This passage offers an elaboration of Swinburne's earlier argument, drawing attention to the fact that his critique of Eliot is not of her creative

powers per se, but rather the propriety of a woman possessing them. Though he echoes earlier critics in applying masculine identifiers to Eliot, her intellect, and her writing, that rhetoric takes on new meaning in the context of passage so centrally concerned with gender propriety. Swinburne never lets us forget that while Brontë is making herself useful in the Queen's Gardens, Eliot is trespassing in the King's Treasuries.

That Swinburne sees something threatening and potentially dangerous about this infiltration is made even more explicit in his analysis of Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss.* Here, again, he begins by praising the first two parts of the text:

> They carry such affluent weight of thought and shine with such warm radiance of humour as invigorates and illuminates the work of no other famous woman; they have the fiery clarity of crystal or of lightening. (30)

Yet, his praise of the first two parts is no sooner offered than it is undercut by his condemnation of the third and final section—in which the heroine Maggie Tulliver is drawn into a compromising relationship with her cousin's suitor, Stephen Guest—as an unforgivable authorial offense:

> No such degradation of female character seems ever to have suggested itself as imaginable . . . Madame de Merteuil [from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*] would never have believed it . . . The hideous transformation by which Maggie is debased . . . would probably and deservedly have been resented as a brutal and vulgar outrage on the part of a male novelist . . . Here then is the patent flaw, here too plainly is the flagrant blemish, which defaces and degrades the very crown and flower of Eliot's most noble work; no rent or splash on the raiment, no speck or scar on the skin of it, but a cancer in the very bosom, a gangrene in the very flesh. (33, 36-37)

As Swinburne's attitude towards Maggie (post-boat trip) falls in line with those of the small-minded townspeople that Eliot's novel critiques, his criticisms also conflate the plot of the novel with its form and its heroine with the author. The figurative language that Swinburne uses throughout his reading of *The Mill on the Floss* imagines the

novel not as the product of the author's imagination but rather as a vehicle through which one can see that imagination. It is a crystal through which Eliot's thoughts refract; it is a bolt of lightning illuminating a mental darkness. Later, it is a "damned spot" on the body of the text that reveals its internal state of disorder and decay. For Swinburne, Maggie's fall from grace is something for which Eliot is responsible. What is more, Maggie's debasement is also the novel's, and both speak to the corrupting influence of certain types of fiction (in this case, realism) on the intellect of a woman. That Eliot is deemed capable of imagining a situation that Swinburne argues—a bit impertinently—would have boggled the mind of even Laclos's scheming seductress, Madame de Merteiul, signals the degree to which his argument blurs the boundaries between the real and the fictional. It also implies that the imaginative transgressions of women are in some ways more dangerous than any real liaisons into which they may enter; George Eliot's disgrace is to have imagined what should have been "unimaginable," what "on the part of a male novelist" would have been "a brutal and vulgar outrage."

So, when written by a male novelist, the representation of a heroine's "transformation" from complete innocent to a woman with a half-conscious, guilty awareness of her own desires is itself understood as a sort of sexual violation, on par with the actions of an actual seducer. But, how should this fictional scenario to be understood if it is conceived of by a female novelist? Swinburne never answers this question directly, which makes it tempting to assume that his anxiety is with the idea of one woman corrupting another, even if the corrupting influence is a real woman and the figure corrupted is fictional. Yet, for a poet who once chose Sappho as his mouthpiece—a Sappho who when addressing her lover Anactoria, a woman "more to me than all men as thou art," wishes that she might "crush thee out of life with love, and die / Die of thy pain and my delight, and be / Mixed with thy blood and molten

into thee"—it is hard to believe that quasi-Lesbian debauchery, in any form, would have been so terrifyingly "unimaginable" (85, 130-132).[35] What remains, then, is the possibility that what most alarms Swinburne is narrative possibility itself. Eliot's "corruption" of Maggie Tulliver is distressing precisely because it cannot be explained (or excused) using the familiar cultural script of male seducer and female victim. The scenario that Eliot's text imagines offers nothing so simple as a tale of sexual innocence lost; rather, it locates its heroine's potential guilt beyond the body, in the uncharted waters of her imaginative longing for a kind of life unbounded by the social controls that define her real existence. And, like her heroine, Eliot herself is threatening to Swinburne because, as a woman writer, she is able to give voice and form to these previously unrepresentable ideas and to bring into (fictional) being all sorts of unsettling and subversive scenarios. To describe this one scene from *The Mill on the Floss* as a "cancer," which is malignant because of its potential for unlimited expansion at the expense of the body of its host, seems to suggest that the body for which Swinburne is so concerned is not Eliot's novel specifically but the novel generally, and generically. Moreover, the complex series of images that he employs in his critique could be seen as part of an extended effort to figuratively embody the writings of his feminine subjects in ways that evoke and reinstate the gendered codes of literary and artistic representation that these writings and the writers themselves challenge.

Swinburne's complementary praise of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* only underscores the dynamics of gender informing his argument. The proof of Brontë's genius is to be found in her "painting and . . . handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction," he argues. His analysis of *Villette* accordingly focuses almost

[35] Algernon Swinburne, "Anactoria," *Selected Poems* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Of course, Swinburne himself had changed a good deal between writing "Anactoria" and his "Note," having been under virtual house arrest at the home of Theodore Watts, to whom his Note is dedicated.

exclusively on Brontë's representation of character, which Swinburne continues to describe in terms of the visual arts, particularly painting and photography. Curiously, though, his depiction of Brontë rarely grants her the agency of a creative artist; he portrays Brontë's writing as a transparent or reflective medium, a clear, mirrored, or refractive surface through which pass images from the real world. Thus, when describing the "exquisite veracity and pathos [of] the subtle and faultless portrait" of Paulina Home, a child befriended by Lucy Snowe, the heroine of *Villette,* Swinburne insists that the charm of this character is

> not wholly or mainly the charm of infancy, as felt either in actual fleshly life or in simple reflection from the flawless mirror of loving or adoring genius; it comes rather from the latent suggestion or refraction of the woman yet to be, struck sharply back or dimly shaded out from the deep glass held up to us of a passionate and visionary childhood. (49-50)

In this slightly dizzying proliferation of visual imagery, the character of Paulina Home—a "portrait" in and of itself—is not merely a narrative painting taken from real life or even a reflection of Brontë herself (her genius being the mirror in which Paulina Home is reflected); the character of Paulina Home as a child is also a crystalline substance through which one can glimpse the refracted image of the woman Paulina will become. The charm of this character, for Swinburne, lies in its pellucidity, a clarity that transcends the progression of the narrative. Whether infant or adult, Swinburne suggests, all are only facets of the same gemstone, and there is but one, essential Paulina, a true self clearly visible to the eye of the reader. Contrary to the "transformation" of Maggie Tulliver—offensive precisely because it challenges one's initial impression of her character—the development of Paulina Home only confirms what the reader has already seen of her "passionate and visionary" nature.

That the description of Paulina Home as "passionate and visionary" could as easily be applied to her creator is not perhaps an accident. Though Swinburne does

not belabor the biographical in his assessment of Brontë, his readings of her novels continually suggest that her especial skill as a "narrative painter" is in the field of *self*-portraiture. For example, *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe is deemed by Swinburne "the faithful likeness of Charlotte Brontë, studied from life, and painted by her own hand with the austere precision of a photograph rather than a portrait" (82). While obviously meant as praise, this comment is importantly ambiguous. As with the description of Paulina Home, Swinburne's assessment of the characterization of Lucy is based on its fidelity to a particular ideal or model of femininity. Swinburne celebrates the "austere precision" of Brontë's hand, but in a way that denies her of the role of creator. Lucy Snowe is presented as a photographic negative of Charlotte Brontë, rendering the author little more than a glorified (self)copyist. Brontë herself again becomes embodied within her own fiction as an object of the reader's perception. Through Lucy, Brontë herself is offered up for both critical and aesthetic evaluation: her talent as a portraitist is determined by the degree of realism with which she depicts herself, and that depiction, in turn, determines how she (the woman, not the writer) is to be viewed by her audience. Conflating the real with the fictional, Swinburne confines Brontë within the bounds of her own creation, a maneuver that renders indistinct the difference between (female) subject and (female) object while it reinforces the centrality of the (female) body to discussions of the aesthetic relation.

Charlotte Brontë herself anticipated Swinburne's argument here. Swinburne's description of Brontë "drawing" Lucy Snowe almost exactly replicates a scenario in *Jane Eyre* in which the title heroine draws herself. In this particular scene, Jane Eyre, in an effort to resign herself to what she sees as her inevitable defeat by Blanche Ingram in a contest for her master's affections, sets herself the task of sketching a pair of contrasting portraits. Though she has yet to lay eyes on Blanche Ingram, she instructs herself to spare no creative expense and to "delineate carefully the loveliest

face you can imagine," complete with an "oriental eye," and a head with "raven curls" attached to a "Grecian neck and bust." As for her own portrait, she gives herself very different advice:

> Listen, then, Jane Eyre, to your sentence tomorrow, place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully; without softening one defect: omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity; write under it, "Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain. (183)[36]

For Jane Eyre, to draw these images is an exercise in self-chastening, a way of checking her unruly passions by making visible to herself the desirability of her rival and her own comparative insignificance. Jane imagines not only two different female models but also two very different methods of representation. Envisioned as the perfect object of masculine desire, Blanche Ingram is constructed (as yet only in Jane's mind) according to standards set by the Western aesthetic tradition. The resulting image is an ideal woman; with her "oriental" eye and "Grecian" bust, she is the epitome of various cultural conventions of feminine beauty. The specificity with which Jane Eyre can describe the ideal incarnation of each feature—down to its place of origin—speaks to the pervasiveness and tenacity of these aesthetic conventions. It also suggests the typical way in which actual female bodies are seen by male artists and viewers: not as subjects in their own right, but, instead, as so much scrap metal, valuable collections of individual parts. Preparing herself to draw the ideal Blanche Ingram, Jane temporarily adopts this anatomizing perspective; her cataloguing of the imaginary Blanche's physical attributes as well as her rich and sumptuous attire ("aerial lace and glistening satin, graceful scarf and golden rose") anticipates the gaze of the desiring male viewer and provocatively envisions a figure positioned and arranged solely for its viewing pleasure.

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[36] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Michael Mason (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

If Blanche Ingram, though, is imagined as the ultimate pin-up model (the Victorian equivalent of Betty Grable in a white bathing suit), Jane Eyre's idea of self-representation is a different thing entirely. Whereas Blanche is mentally painted by Jane according to a process of delimitation (an ideal beauty constructed through the recognition of pre-set aesthetic standards and boundaries), Jane sketches out her own self-portrait through the denial of such ideals. As she says to herself, she will look in the mirror and represent what she sees "faithfully," "softening" nothing, "omit[ting]" nothing, "smooth[ing] away" nothing. It is a defiant realism that she holds to here, and what is distinctive about her chosen method of representation is that Brontë frames it in terms of what her heroine *will not do*. Though Jane's refusal to idealize her own image is ostensibly a means of punishing herself for emotions she now considers presumptuous, it also signals her unwillingness to be complicit with an aesthetic tradition that traffics in idealized female forms. By foregrounding the ways in which her own person deviates from accepted standards of feminine beauty, Jane attempts to escape aesthetic objectification; she demands to be seen as nothing more than what she is: "a Governess, disconnected, poor and plain." Of course, it is impossible to escape objectification completely, and, in a way, Jane simply exchanges an aesthetic evaluative framework for a social one, circumventing judgments based on gender conventions by defining herself in terms of class and economic markers.[37] Yet, the difference is that these other systems of classification—if they objectify her as a category or a type—do not involve her body, leaving her less vulnerable to the kinds of exposure and psychic violation that explicitly gendered systems entail.

Brontë frequently draws her own heroines through this strategy of negative description, which suggests that she shares their sentiments. Even when her female protagonists engage in moments of self-observation, these scenes are typically

[37] I am indebted to James Eli Adams for this idea, which has been helpful in terms bringing the question of different social dynamics back into the discussion.

rendered in ways that keep the bodies of the characters off the page. As when *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe catches a glimpse of herself in a large concert-hall mirror, the experience has little to do with the image itself and much more with the experience of seeing: in her words, "Thus for the first, and perhaps only time in my life, I enjoyed the giftie of seeing myself as others see me. No need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret; it was not flattering, yet, after all, I ought to be thankful: it might have been worse" (286).[38] Here, as with Jane Eyre's self-portrait, Brontë creates a narrative scenario that seems to encourage the reader to view the heroine's body as an aesthetic object—in this case, literally placing Lucy within the frame of a mirror—only to then frustrate that impulse when Lucy herself fails to relay the content of what she sees. Instead, she offers the reader her weirdly fractured impression of the moment, in which her objective "reflection" (the image in the mirror, the physical self seen by the world) is almost totally elided in her subjective "reflections" (her intellectual and affective responses to that image). In other words, the dubious "giftie" (as Lucy calls it, after Robert Burns) to occupy, if only for a split-second, the position of the disinterested viewer produces an uncanny division of self. As doppelgängers, self-as-observer and self-as-object face each other in a moment of confrontation, their close proximity belying the fact that they are separated by what Brontë suggests is an indivisible barrier between two perspectival positions that cannot be reconciled without the danger of canceling each other out.

Though written more than a decade before "A Note on Charlotte Brontë," this scene from *Villette* proleptically problematizes the aestheticizing gaze informing Swinburne's critical assessment of Brontë's genius. Like Brontë's, Swinburne's

[38] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*. ed. Mark Lilly (New York: Penguin Classics, 1980). Included in this passage is a reference to the final stanza of Robert Burns's "To a Louse": "Oh wad some power the giftie gie us / To see oursel's as ithers see us! / It wad frae monie a blunder free us, / An' foolish notion" (43-46).

depiction of Lucy Snowe—made close to the end of his essay—places her in a frame, albeit a frame of a very different sort:

> In the house where I now write this there is a picture which I have known through all the years I can remember—a landscape by Crome; showing just a wild sad track of shoreward brushwood and chill fen, blasted and wasted by the bitter breath of the east wind blowing off the eastward sea, shriveled and subdued and resigned as it were with a sort of grim submission . . . As with all this it is yet always a pleasure to look upon so beautiful and noble a study of so sad and harsh-featured an outlying byway through the weariest waste places of the world, so is it in its kind a perpetual pleasure to revisit the wellnigh sunless landscape of Lucy Snowe's sad, passionate and valiant life. (83-84)

To describe the experience of re-reading the narrative of Lucy Snowe as akin to that of re-viewing a painted landscape by Romantic artist John Crome is in many ways fitting conclusion to a piece of criticism that has striven throughout to render its subject as a visual spectacle and its own evaluative methods in aesthetic terms. The top-heavy form of the analogy—with Swinburne's impression of Crome's landscape looming over the brief description of "Lucy Snowe's sad, passionate, and valiant life"—is also fitting, as in "A Note on Charlotte Brontë," Brontë's fiction seems most valuable to Swinburne as an occasion for his own critical meditation on literature, aesthetics, and gender. For Swinburne, every aspect of Brontë is defined by his own experience of her work, the experience of the masculine viewer with the feminine object. Whether she and George Eliot are seen as works of art (the former "a type of genius directed and moulded by the touch of intelligence," the latter "a type of intelligence vivified and coloured by a vein of genius") or as female knights of legend (a "Britomartis or Bradamante, on her most desperate and forlorn adventure" whose missteps have "a claim at least on the compassionate forebearance of every good knight-errant"), Swinburne's depictions of Charlotte Brontë always presuppose the existence of a masculine observer for whom the feminine (in all of its various incarnations) must be concretized, objectified, aestheticized (20, 24). The comparison of *Villette* to an

untitled landscape painting is a logical last step in the process—having already conflated Lucy Snowe with her author, the time-span of her narrative "life" is now condensed into a single detemporalized image of "sad and harsh-featured" scenery that has nothing to do with the novel itself. Yet, the fact that Brontë's text and Crome's painting are only associatively related in Swinburne's mind illustrates the degree to which Brontë and her narrative surrogates have been successfully woven into the fabric of Swinburne's evaluative tapestry, incorporated into the complex binaristic system of aesthetics that underwrites this piece of criticism. Though Swinburne does not go so far as to claim to actually see Lucy Snowe in the painting on the wall of his study, his description of Crome's landscape is vividly colored with language that evokes the "sad, passionate, and valiant" person of Brontë's heroine.

In this way, Swinburne detaches Lucy Snowe from the setting of *Villette* and relocates her to the scene of Crome's painting, where she is transformed into a diffused presence that infuses his experience of the painting with significance. Swinburne's transformation of Lucy Snowe has a poetic antecedent in Wordworth's vision of another Lucy, one who once dead and buried becomes spiritually omnipresent as a part of an anthropomorphized feminine Nature, a comfort to her bereaved lover who imagines her "rolled round in earth's diurnal course / with rocks, and stones, and trees" (7-8).[39] In both of these imagined scenarios, evocation becomes invocation; the natural world (or, at least, its painted or poetic representations) continually brings the absent woman to the speaker's thoughts, and it is the thought of her that—muse-like—is called upon to inspire and give form to the speaker's utterance. Swinburne's perception of Lucy Snowe becomes the frame through which he views Crome's landscape, and it is this frame that, in this article at least, makes the prospect worth viewing. Ultimately, though, the object on display here is neither the

[39] William Wordsworth, "A slumber did my spirit seal," *Selected Poems,* ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Penguin, 2004) 71.

novel nor the painting; rather, it is the peculiar "pleasure" that Swinburne derives from the "perpetual" contemplation of these things, their "sunless landscape[s]" and "weariest waste places." Female character and feminine landscape are both prized for the response they elicit in their masculine viewer: a self-conscious pleasure that recognizes as art that which is capable of engaging the aesthetic faculties and of engendering the reflective state in which the observer becomes aware of himself in the act of viewing.

That this state of aesthetic reflection similarly depends on the gendered relation between subject and object is something that Swinburne's article takes for granted. Swinburne's assessments of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot consistently work to naturalize the way in which gender informs the representation of art objects and aesthetic states, in the process reinforcing the social and philosophic ideas that underwrite nineteenth-century art criticism and aesthetic theory. Ironically, it is this same complex matrix of gendered hierarchies that Brontë and Eliot strive to defamiliarize and to unsettle in novels written more than two decades before "A Note on Charlotte Brontë," in their very different depictions of individuals encountering both aesthetic objects and the aestheticizing gazes of others in the symbolically-charged space of the museum. In *Villette* (the subject of the following chapter), Lucy Snowe's visit to a Belgian art gallery provides Brontë with an opportunity to display that "great and absolute genius" with which Swinburne credits her "for the painting and handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction." As the narrative scene, however, is rendered through the eyes of that exotic and disruptive animal—the female viewer—Brontë's handling and painting of its characters against the backdrop of the museum confronts and challenges those relations and reactions on which Swinburne's own critical perspective is dependent, revealing the complicated set of

cultural assumptions on which even the most fleeting of aesthetic experiences is founded.

CHAPTER 2.

Cordons of Protection: The Stage of Spectatorship in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

> I have lately been reading 'Modern Painters,' and I have derived from the work much genuine pleasure and, I hope, some edification; at any rate, it made me feel how ignorant I had previously been on the subject which it treats. Hitherto I have only had instinct to guide me in judging of art; I feel now as if I had been walking blindfold—this book seems to give me eyes—I do wish I had pictures within reach by which to test this new sense.[40]

> I never had a head for science, but an ignorant, blind fond instinct inclined me to art. I liked to visit picture-galleries, and I dearly liked to be left there alone . . . I was happy; happy, not always in admiring, but in examining, questioning, and forming conclusions.[41]

Written roughly five years apart, these professions both flow from the pen of Charlotte Brontë. The first is from an 1848 letter to her publisher W.S. Williams, the second from a passage in her last novel *Villette* (1853). Strikingly similar in their language, these quotations employ the same, superficially paradoxical formulation to describe what was in the nineteenth-century typically invoked as a hall-mark of the truly aesthetic sensibility: an innate responsiveness to art. Hardly the prelapsarian state of aesthetic innocence sometimes imagined by Romantic writers, the inherent "instinct" towards the visual arts as Brontë represents it is "ignorant, blind [and] fond," a primitive drive strangely dislocated from knowledge, deep feeling, and even sight itself.[42] Whereas Wordsworth, in spite of his own prodigious learning, was constantly moved to privilege (if somewhat disingenuously) the perception of children, rustics, ascetics, and eccentrics as somehow purer and more authentic for the absence of a corrupting outside influence, Brontë—both in her fiction and letters—

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[40] Charlotte Brontë, "To W.S. Williams," 31 July 1848, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë,* ed. Margaret Smith, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) 94.
[41] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette.* ed. Mark Lilly (New York: Penguin Classics, 1980) 273-274. All subsequent citations are to this edition.
[42] In this context, I am interpreting Brontë's use of the word "fond" to mean "trivial or foolish" [OED].

frequently reiterates the importance of "test[ing]" one's perceptual faculties through often painful contact with the world.[43] In her letter to Williams, Brontë credits the first two volumes of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* with this realization; his work is "edif[ying]" precisely because it reveals to her the ignorance of her former state, which she compares to movement without any real awareness of direction or destination, to "walking blindfold[ed]." *Modern Painters*, by showing her the purposeless and unstructured nature of her previous aesthetic judgments, renders viewership a more (self)conscious enterprise, making the earlier, innocent mode of perception seem in itself a sort of blindness.

Of course, in voicing these opinions, Brontë is in part taking her cue from Ruskin himself. The first volume of *Modern Painters*—which is largely devoted to outlining the major "ideas" conveyable by great art—is also where Ruskin begins to draw the distinction between two different states of aesthetic perception that he fully articulates in the second volume as the distinction between *aesthesis* and *theoria.* As he defines it, "the mere animal consciousness of the pleasantness [of aesthetic impressions] I call *aesthesis*; but the exulting, reverent, and grateful perception of it I call *theoria*" (236).[44] Peter Fuller, in his study of Ruskin, helpfully reframes the distinction: "[t]he former he described as 'mere sensual perception of the outward qualities and necessary effects of bodies' . . . the latter as the response to beauty of one's moral being" (45).[45] Sidestepping the thorny religious dimension of Ruskin's aesthetic binary, I want to emphasize how this opposition is structured in terms of surface and depth. *Aesthesis* is represented as a largely superficial sensory pleasure

[43] Though I acknowledge that Wordsworth does "refract" the innocent perceptions of his children and madwomen through his own consciousness, I nevertheless would argue that he still privileges the "naïve" (child being the father of man, and all that) even if his own poetry provides an example of the "sentimental."
[44] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* Volume II, Part III, Chapter II (Boston: Aldine Book Publishing, 190?) 231.
[45] Peter Fuller, *Theoria: Art, and the Absence of Grace* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988).

inspired by beautiful objects, while *theoria* is a "grateful" and "exulting" perception of this pleasure, a conscious awareness of the aesthetic faculties whilst one is in the throes of aesthetic experience. This second level of perception, which operates simultaneously and in tandem with "mere sensual perception" in the viewer, has a self-reflexive, performative element, as Ruskin himself obliquely acknowledges in *Modern Painters* when he makes the claim that even the "sensual impressions themselves" might be considered aesthetic "ideas" insofar as they can also be "things which the mind occupies itself about in thinking" (83). The "mere animal" pleasure of *aesthesis*, it seems, has itself a potentially aesthetic component that can be appreciated by the "theoretic" faculty. Thus, Ruskin allows for the possibility that the viewer can turn this higher level of perception inwards and aesthetically evaluate his or her own sensory reactions, scrutinizing them with the same critical gaze that is typically directed at the art object.

In his use of the term "theoretic" (and in his rejection of the more typically-utilized descriptor "aesthetic") to signify a more elevated and conscious level of perception, Ruskin also refines the model of experience typically understood to elicit this kind of perception, limiting it to scenarios in which viewership is the intended, rather than the accidental, function of the moment. I make this argument based on the etymology of the word "theoria," an etymology of which Ruskin was certainly aware. *Theoria* is the Latin derivation of the Greek **θεωρία**, which is itself derived from the word **θεωρός**, meaning "spectator," or literally "one looking at a show." Moreover, though **θεωρία** [*theoria*] does mean "contemplation" or "speculation"—Ruskin's official interpretation of the term in *Modern Painters*—it also can be translated as "spectacle" as well as [the state of] "being a spectator." Thus, implicit in Ruskin's the term is a sort of perspectival indeterminacy. While *theoria* refers to the act or faculty of aesthetic contemplation, it also gestures towards the spectacle itself and to the

spectator's awareness of him- or herself in the act of viewing. As opposed to *aesthesis*, which is limited to the perceptual act, *theoria* is a viewership that depends on an object being displayed and a space created specifically for its display. It is a reciprocally-defining relation: to be a spectator requires a spectacle, and a spectacle is something created with the expectation of spectators. As an aesthetic experience, it is to be distinguished from the typically Romantic epiphanic awakening to (natural, unintended, and unexpected) beauty; instead, it is a moment that has been, in a sense, pre-arranged, even scripted. The viewer comes to it with eyes wide-open (as it were), in anticipation of a visually-arresting (created) sight and with certain pre-conceived notions as to what qualifies as a spectacle and what it means to be a spectator.

My reasons for offering what might seem like a flagrant digression into the wilds of connotative speculation are manifold. On the most basic level, given that I will be focusing on Brontë's representation of aesthetic experience in *Villette*, it seems to me useful in terms of orienting her novel in relation to the ideas of the major aesthetic critic of her day, a critic of whose work her letters prove her to be a diligent reader. Her assertion that Ruskin's book awakened in her a wholly "new sense," a mode of vision so profoundly different as to qualify as a fresh pair of "eyes," is important to consider when thinking about Brontë's increasingly radical experimentation with the representation of perception (specifically feminine perception) in her later novels, particularly *Villette.* I would argue that Brontë's avowed desire in her 1848 letter to Williams—that she might have "pictures within reach by which to test this new sense"—comes to fruition in her last (completed) novel. In *Villette*, Brontë performs by proxy the newly self-conscious mode of viewership that is the inheritance of her encounter with *Modern Painters.* The novel's heroine Lucy Snowe—an English Protestant émigré teaching in a 'Pensionnat de Demoiselles" in Catholic Brussels—is repeatedly made an audience to pictures and

performances, private scenes and public spectacles, all of which test the limits of her perceptual faculties and, in the process, put on display a developing aesthetic sensibility that is anything but "ignorant, blind, [and] fond." Significantly, though, in *Villette* the formative influence of Ruskin is largely obscured, making the strange echo of Brontë's letter that one hears in Lucy Snowe's description of her aesthetic "instinct" a repetition with an important difference. The viewer's encounter with an art object—the "test" to which Brontë refers in her letter—is, in *Villette,* not the confirmation of a "new sense" but rather the genesis of it. In other words, Brontë's representations of aesthetic experience in her novel do not presuppose the perspectival position of Ruskin's ideal "theoretic" viewer so much as they attempt to imaginatively create the sorts of situations that might encourage its development. Offering a series of narrative scenarios that dramatize Lucy's encounters with various pieces of art, Brontë brings to the fore what might be called the *institutional* aspect of aesthetic experience. By focusing on the process (not the result) of such experiences, she reveals what is typically obscured in aesthetic treatises like *Modern Painters*: the fact that the aesthetic encounter is itself a rule-bound experience, shaped and delimited by internalized and external social forces that reinforce the mores and values that define the emerging art culture of which Lucy is both an eager and skeptical disciple.

In these narrative efforts, Brontë emphasizes something that is noticeably absent from Ruskin's book: an awareness of the potential complications that face the viewer in places specifically created for aesthetic appreciation. Whereas *Modern Painters* focuses solely on the hypothetical relation between the viewing subject and the object of *his* gaze (I use the masculine pronoun advisedly), *Villette* depicts these supposedly private moments as they occur within public spaces. Setting all of Lucy's most profound aesthetic encounters against a series of bustling backdrops—the places of pleasure for the bourgeoisie in the Belgian city of Villette—Brontë complicates

Ruskin's equation through the inclusion of various social integers. Rather than affording Lucy Snowe the mental solitude that Ruskin assumes for his viewer, Brontë depicts her heroine's aesthetical experiences as being constantly intruded upon, responsive to and altered by the shaping forces of outside stimuli. Even when (as in the quotation above) Lucy Snowe wishes to be "left alone" in an art gallery in order to do the aesthetic work of "examining, questioning, and forming conclusions" about a piece of art, this work is shown to be inevitably affected and effected by the environment in which it occurs.

Though many moments in *Villette* might qualify as aesthetic experiences, Lucy Snowe's aforementioned visit to the art gallery is exemplary. While critics have made the case for reading this scene in conjunction with Lucy's later visit to the theater, to conflate the space of the museum and the space of the theater is to obscure the unique place that each occupies in the Victorian cultural imaginary and, more specifically, in Brontë's novel. Even if there is something inherently "theatrical" about Lucy Snowe's behavior in the art gallery, it is a theatricality that can be traced back to Brontë's interest in staging a newly-conceived Ruskinian conception of viewership, a mode of perception that is inextricably tied to the rise of museum culture in the nineteenth century. This changing conception of aesthetic experience figured in Ruskin's conceptualization of *theoria* is bound up with the transition in the philosophy of aesthetics from the Kantian privileging of nature as the primary object of perceptual appreciation to the Hegelian privileging of the work of art.[46] Neither of these conceptual shifts can be divorced from the historical context, however, in which the museum as a public institution really came into its own. The significance of this latter development is rarely explored in nineteenth-century aesthetic criticism and philosophy. Though *Modern Painters,* for example, is a text with a deliberately

[46] Gerard Genette talks about this change in *The Aesthetic Relation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999) 199-201.

pedagogical function, intended to educate the masses on the subject of aesthetic appreciation, Ruskin is always cagey on the matter of where the public should go to test out those very sensibilities his book is intended to cultivate. Similarly, when Hegel, in Gerard Genette's words, pronounces "artistic beauty, as a production of the spirit, superior to natural beauty," the work of art is imagined as separate from the scene of viewership, unfettered by the material specificities that are always a part of lived experience (202).

The material contexts that remain obscured in Ruskin and Hegel are exactly what Charlotte Brontë exposes in *Villette* through her narrativization of the aesthetic encounter as it occurs in the controlled and coded space of the museum. The web of contingencies that constitute the viewing experience—the way in which the work is arranged (where it is hung and what other works are proximate to it), the physical position of the viewer (where he or she is placed in relation to the art object), the presence or absence of other viewers—are represented in this scene as having a major and determinate influence on perception itself. In addition to the physical position of the viewer, one must acknowledge the viewer's subject position: the unique combination of physiological and psychological features that predisposes the individual to perceive a particular object in a certain light. In the museum, Brontë stages Lucy Snowe's encounter with art objects in ways that underscore the impact that these external and internal factors have on the structuring of aesthetic experience. In the process, she removes *theoria* from the realm of the philosophically theoretical and puts it into narrative practice, thereby recuperating the lost spectacle at the heart of **θεωρία** and demonstrating through the self-consciously performative perceptions of her heroine a "mind occup[ying] itself . . . in thinking."

This narrative enactment of something approximating Ruskinian viewership can be seen as much more than a simple demonstration of aesthetic competency.

While Brontë's rendering of Lucy Snowe's experience in the museum proves her familiarity with the key terms and concepts in aesthetics, her application of this knowledge shows an agenda ultimately quite different from Ruskin's. The museum scene in *Villette* should be read as the strongest expression of a concerted effort on Brontë's part (an effort that extends throughout her novel) to demystify the process by which certain sorts of perceptual acts are vested with the authority that comes from being deemed *aesthetic*. The museum is the ideal site for this sort of endeavor, as it is itself a sort of narrative space, by which I mean a space that is created and structured for the purpose of communicating a particular narrative of culture. In Foucault's words, the museum is a "heterotopia[] of indefinitely accumulating time," a real place that is nevertheless also imaginary in that it is a reflection of a society's vision of itself and its slanted view of the history that preceded it.[47] Enshrining certain cultural artifacts to the exclusion of others, the museum represents spatially the oppressive social and ideological structures that authorize the perspectives of particular viewers, enforce their privileged position, and proclaim their standards of judgment as normative or universal. Tony Bennett, in his book *The Birth of the Museum*, argues for a critical awareness of how the "layout" of a museum—its arrangement of objects within the confines of its space—is indicative of its "theory"—"a particular set of explanatory categories and principles of categorization." It is the "theory" underlying a museum's use of space, he claims, that "mediates the relations between the viewer and the art on display in such a way that, for some but not for others, seeing the art exhibited serves as a means of *seeing through* those artifacts to see an invisible order of significance that they have been arranged to represent" (165).[48] In *Villette*, it is through Lucy Snowe's aesthetic perceptions that the reader comes to *see through* the art objects that she *sees* to the Foucauldian "order of things" that lies underneath.

[47] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (1967), *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 26.
[48] Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Lucy herself alludes to the existence of this "invisible order" directly prior to her trip to the museum, when she comments on the "perfect knowledge" of Villette possessed by her self-appointed "cicerone," Dr. John Bretton (Lucy's countryman, as the name suggests):

> I often felt amazed at his perfect knowledge of Villette; a knowledge not merely confined to its open streets, but penetrating to all its galleries, salles, and cabinets: of every door which shut in an object worth seeing, of every museum, every hall, sacred to art or science, he seemed to possess the 'Open! Sesame!'" (273).

In likening the museums, galleries, and all other places "sacred to art or science" to the Thieves' Cave in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, full of stolen gold and protected by a secret, magical password, Lucy draws attention to the deceptively private nature of these supposedly public institutions. The mark of the cultural insider is that one knows the "open streets" to be ultimately "confin[ing]," that one is capable of seeing not simply laterally (along the surface of things), but also vertically ("penetrating" the depths to things "worth seeing"). That Lucy attributes this "perfect knowledge" of Villette to John Bretton is fitting, as his job as a physician grants him a level of access to the homes and society of the cultural elite that he otherwise, as a foreigner and as a member of the middle-class, would be denied.

Yet, even as Lucy compares John Bretton to the poor but wily woodcutter Ali Baba, this chapter of *Villette* invites the reader to carry the analogy even further and to compare Lucy herself to the narrator of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade. With its elaborate prefatory remarks, the "Cleopatra" chapter seems intended to illustrate Lucy's (and the author's) views on art and perception. After the aforementioned general reflections upon aesthetic experience and those cultural inner sanctums in which such experiences are supposed to take place, the story switches abruptly into a more decidedly narrative account of what happened "[o]ne day, at a

quiet early hour, [when she] found herself nearly alone in a certain gallery" (275). Read in relation to the latter tale, Lucy's opening remarks operate as a frame of sorts, providing the reader with insight into the aesthetic criteria on which her judgments are based.[49] Again, the influence of *Modern Painters* is unmistakable. Ruskin's famous injunction to the young artist to "go to Nature in all singleness of heart . . . having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning and to remember her instruction . . . rejoicing always in the truth" is echoed in Lucy's comments on what distinguishes a good painting from a bad one (210). For Lucy, even "chef d'oeuvres bearing great names" might be dismissed if what they represent is "not a whit like nature"; those worthy of her praise are ones that display

> fragments of truth here and there which satisfied the conscience, and gleams of light that cheered the vision. Nature's power here broke through in a mountain snow-storm; and there her glory in a sunny southern day. An expression in

[49] That there is something potentially subversive about Lucy Snowe's dramatic enactments of what George Eliot would later call "double consciousness"—an inherently self-reflexive mode of perception, in which the individual is both an active participant in a scene and a detached viewer of it—has been noted by several critics, including Mary Jacobus and Christina Crosby. Though they come at it from different angles, with Jacobus using a psychoanalytic and Crosby a loosely deconstructive model, both locate in *Villette*'s "Gothic" fascination with doubling and doppelgängers the presence of a revolutionary feminism that strives to dismantle from within the patriarchal system of hierarchies that defines and confines its heroine. In "*Villette*'s Buried Letter," first published in *Essays in Criticism* 29 (July 1978), Jacobus argues that "this doubleness informs the novel as a whole," indicating the presence of "an incompletely repressed Romanticism" threatening to overwhelm "the narrative and representational conventions of Victorian realism." In "Charlotte Brontë's Haunted Text," published in *SEL* 24 (1984), Crosby, responding to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's claim that Brontë is inviting the reader "to experience with her the interiority of the [feminine] Other," reads the strange "play of doublings, mirrors, and reversals" at work in the narrative as part of a more radical effort to "displace identities and compromise the founding differences on which notions of consciousness and interiority depend." Both of these arguments offer compelling interpretations of the seemingly divided nature of the narrative, the tendency of its speaker's sensitive and imaginative perspective to transform an everyday, unremarkable occurrence into a moment verging on the Uncanny. Each also stresses the significance of gender in Brontë's experimentation with the representation of subjective experience, with Jacobus going so far as to describe Lucy's consciousness as "a distorting hall of mirrors in which each projection [the other female characters in the novel through whom "Lucy both defines and fails to recognize herself"] is obedient to her feelings of gratitude, rivalry, attraction, hatred or envy." While it is undeniable that Lucy's imagination is a profoundly destabilizing force in *Villette*, there is a potential danger to reading the novel as the unstable composite of two, dichotomous narrative registers, part realist, conventional and patriarchal, part Romantic, subversive, and feminist; it risks reducing the complex interplay of these two narrative registers to merely oppositional forces, conflicting with instead of complementing each other.

> this portrait provided clear insight into character . . . These exceptions I loved: they grew dear as friends (275).

Reversing Ruskin's command for the artist to go deep to "penetrate" Nature's hidden meaning, Lucy's ideal conception of aesthetic experience imagines the viewer somehow seeing through the painting's surface and catching a glimpse of an underlying elemental power or universal truth. What differentiates Lucy's position from Ruskin's is that she can only conceive of this process as occurring in a piecemeal fashion. As her description shows, it is only in "fragments" and "gleams" that a particular representation succeeds in piercing through the layer of convention and communicating to the viewer anything of significance. Moreover, Ruskin's formulation never considers what the story that follows Lucy's opening takes great pains to establish: that the space of the museum works against the epiphanic moment, mostly because of its highly artificial, anticipatory staging of the aesthetic encounter.

Following as it does on the heels of Lucy's sincere and impassioned reflections upon the nature of art and the art of nature, her recounting of an actual gallery experience in which she acts as a viewer—in this case, of a much-lauded painting of Cleopatra—strikes a jarringly discordant note. Using the detailed yet indeterminate language of the storyteller (establishing the scene without locating it within a specific context), Lucy describes the arrangement of the gallery in a way that strives to expose its constructedness, its contrivedness:

> One day, at a quiet early hour, I found myself nearly alone in a certain gallery, wherein one particular picture of pretentious size, set up in the best light, having a cordon of protection stretched before it, and a cushioned bench duly set in front for the accommodation of worshipping connoisseurs, who, having gazed themselves off their feet, might be fain to complete the business sitting: this picture, I say, seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection. (275)

In this long and elaborate sentence, a paragraph unto itself and an anacoluthon to boot, Lucy gives the most ironical of answers to a question often asked by museum visitors:

How does one *know* which art object is "the queen of the collection"? The answer: Look for the one sitting on the throne. Refusing at this moment to give the reader any clue as to the picture itself (except a brief note about how its size indicates a pretension to grandeur on the part of the artist), Lucy instead focuses on how the arrangement of space surrounding the painting is designed to underscore its importance. Using a series of buried clauses, one piled upon the next, her grammar serves as a textual analogy for this spatial structuring; not only is this painting placed front and center, but it is placed in the best light, is sectioned off from the rest of the gallery by a protective barrier, and has a bench set in front of it in order to herd onlookers into an appreciative group before it. Indeed, the only way to describe the scene is to embed descriptive phrase within descriptive phrase, repeatedly deferring the reader's encounter with the painting itself. Thus, the experience of reading this passage mimics the experience of viewing the painting; Brontë prepares the reader for what is about to be described in much the same way that the museum prepares the viewer for the encounter with the celebrated picture. Yet, as the conclusion of this sentence implies, no amount of scenic pageantry can change the intrinsic worth of the art object. The painting is not "the queen of the collection" because there is anything about it essentially powerful and worthy of worship. Rather, like her living counterparts, the Cleopatra's status as monarch is largely a function of the arbitrary organization of things, royalty and other positions of power being themselves bestowed by custom, biological accident, and political arrangement. Thus, in spite of the pomp and circumstance heralding its presence, the painting's appearance of value is mostly the product of its situation within the artificial, coded space of the gallery.

Lucy Snowe's description of the gallery housing the Cleopatra indicates her unstated recognition of (and resistance to) a form of aesthetic experience in which one's response to an art object is manipulated by external circumstances. While she

makes a point of noticing the physical boundary separating the picture from the viewer, her highly figurative language also partially collapses (or at least complicates) the implicit distinction between the imaginary space of the painting and the "real" space of the museum. The non-verbal signifiers used by museum curators to confer distinction on a particular painting—ornate frames, prohibitive cordons, light sources, chairs and benches (all of which, importantly, work to position the viewer as well)—are read parodically as indicators of the homage to which the painting feels that it is entitled as "the queen" of this particular collection. By pretending to ignore the role of the museum in establishing a painting's value and instead ironically attributing that evaluative capacity to the picture itself (anthropomorphizing it only to deride its conscious self-satisfaction with its own beauty), Lucy underscores the strange and ultimately groundless abdication of authority practiced by viewers when they allow their judgment to be manipulated by the literal arrangement and figurative ranking of art objects in a space designed for aesthetic contemplation and consumption. Moreover, as her derision of the painting's supposed feeling of entitlement suggests, the viewer is encouraged to surrender evaluative agency through the implication that artistic value is an intrinsic feature of the art object itself.[50] To appreciate a painting because it is placed in such a way that it demands notice, Lucy suggests, makes as little sense as crowning a woman a queen simply because she sees herself as royalty.

Tony Tanner has argued that the art gallery and the theatre in *Villette* are "*framed* spaces" in which "[t]he frame separates the audience from the spectacle and thus the framed space is discontinuous with the social space containing it." "One effect of this," he adds, "is to allow extremes of representation or action, (which are only latent or totally suppressed in the social space,) to be projected in a way which

[50] I am indebted to Fredric Bogel for this very helpful observation.

allows for contemplation without actual involvement."[51] What Tanner might have considered, though, is that the museum—unlike the theatre—is a social space designed to create relations not only between the viewer and the art object but also between the viewer and other viewers. Thus, to say that framed space is "discontinuous" with social space is to overlook scenarios in which social space is, itself "framed," rendering the audience part of the spectacle that they suppose themselves to be outside of. It is the "createdness" and the sociality of museum space that gives it this aura of theatricality, a theatricality that infuses the entire scene, compromising the boundary that Tanner assumes between subject and object, between spectator and spectacle.

Without such clear lines of division, the theatricality of the museum space is capable of transforming viewership itself into a performance, a point that Lucy herself acknowledges when she describes her dislike of visiting such places with others:

> In company, a wretched idiosyncrasy forbade me to see much or to feel anything . . . where it was necessary to maintain a flow of talk on the subjects in presence, half an hour would knock me up . . . I never yet saw the well-reared child, much less the educated adult, who could not put me to shame, by the sustained intelligence of its demeanour under the ordeal of a conversable sociable visitation of pictures (274).

The problem with visiting a museum in a group is here two-fold. On the one hand, the consciousness of others' presences makes the subjective experience of aesthetic reflection nearly impossible, preventing Lucy from "see[ing] much or feel[ing] anything." On the other, to be "in company" at the museum is to submit to being on display to and as a part of that company. At the theatre, one might attend as part of a group and yet, for at least the duration of the play, hide in the darkness of the auditorium, allowing for the "contemplation without involvement" that Tanner describes. The well-lighted, open space of the museum, however, does not offer its

[51] Tony Tanner, introduction, *Villette,* by Charlotte Brontë, ed. Mark Lilly (New York: Penguin Classics, 1980) 21-22.

visitors the same security against scrutiny. Instead, it creates an environment in which private perceptual acts can have a public aspect and potentially a social function. In the "conversable sociable visitation of pictures" that Lucy finds so arduous, contemplation is no longer an end in itself but rather a means to an end; one looks at pictures in order to speak on them, in the process demonstrating a certain level of aesthetic proficiency as well as politely contributing to the social "flow of talk on the subjects in presence." Even when one is not speaking, Lucy laments, one still must be conscious enough of oneself to sustain an "intelligence of demeanour" that signals a certain level of engagement with others. Tellingly, Lucy sees the social necessity as an "intelligence of demeanour," rather than, say, an intelligence of expression. A "demeanour" (etymologically and otherwise) has little to do with real feelings; it refers to a "conduct, way of acting," a "manner of comporting oneself outwardly or towards others" [OED]. A public persona that is constructed out of internalized social codes, the individual's "demeanour" is a creation of a certain disciplined self-consciousness that is meant for an audience. Thus, when Lucy states that both an "educated adult" and a "well-reared child" are her superiors in this regard, it is not true aesthetic engagement that she is speaking of but rather the *look* of engagement, not the disinterested, detached perspective prized by aesthetic theorists but the active, self-involved and ultimately performative mode of viewership that the museum encourages or perhaps even requires.

Indeed, what Lucy's subsequent narration of her Belgian gallery visit makes clear is that no one is truly outside the shaping influence of those cultural scripts that structure the space of the museum. While Brontë invests her heroine with a critical awareness of the social dynamics that complicate idealized conceptions of aesthetic experience, this awareness only serves to heighten and, in different ways, to ironize the intrinsically dramatic nature of her encounter with the Cleopatra. It is Lucy's very

attentiveness to the ways in which outside circumstances can manipulate her aesthetic responses that renders the Cleopatra an object of such importance, and her description of the painting, for this reason, is an exercise in resistance:

> It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat—to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids—must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not claim a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material—seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery—she managed to make inefficient raiment. Then, for the wretched untidiness surrounding her, there could be no excuse. Pots and pans—perhaps I ought to say vases and goblets—were rolled here and there on the foreground; a perfect rubbish of flowers was mixed among them, and an absurd and disorderly mass of curtain upholstery smothered the couch and cumbered the floor. On referring to the catalogue, I found that this notable production bore the name 'Cleopatra.' (276)

Lucy's spirited and combative engagement with the painting is a direct response to her reading into its subject, style, size and spatial arrangement an institutionalized insistence on its value. Of course, by making the Cleopatra the battlefield on which she stakes her opposition to the collective standards of judgment that would praise it, she tacitly acknowledges the painting's social—if not aesthetic—significance. This acknowledgment, though, is necessary to the larger agenda that informs this chapter of *Villette*. In order for Brontë to illustrate the process by which certain spaces transform aesthetic experience itself into a sort of self-conscious spectacle, her heroine must engage with a painting that, if we take her earlier professions at face-value, is beneath her notice. Yet the Cleopatra, epitomizing a mode of artistic representation that is focused solely on technical mastery, on surface detail that is "beautiful" rather than

"true," offers a perfect complement to the performative mode of aesthetic valuation that Lucy ironically mimics and, through mimicry, seeks to unsettle.

That Brontë made the subject of this painting Cleopatra is no less important to the scene than its style. As other critics have noted, Brontë probably based the picture on one by Edouard De Biefve that she saw at the Brussels Salon of 1842, but that image was simply called "Une Alme" (A Dancing-Girl).[52] In identifying her odalisque as a representation of the infamous Egyptian queen, Brontë situates the image more broadly within what Jill Matus has called "the burgeoning nineteenth-century fascination with the East and interest in Oriental exoticism."[53] More specifically, the figure of Cleopatra was of particular interest to artists and writers of the period as a model of the *femme fatale*, embodying (in Coleridge's words, taken from his criticism of *Antony and Cleopatra*) "a passion [that] springs out of the habitual craving of a licentious nature, and that . . . is supported and reinforced by voluntary stimulus and sought-for associations, instead of blossoming out of spontaneous emotion."[54] As Coleridge's description attests, it is not simply Cleopatra's supposed carnality that constitutes her dangerous allure but also the assumption that this carnality is itself consciously and deliberately cultivated. Her incitement of her own "licentious nature" is seen to give to her "passion" a dramatic aspect, rendering it a provocative display directed towards a susceptible viewer. Coleridge's representation of Shakespeare's character closely aligns with Brontë's imaginary ekphrasis in their shared insistence on the unnatural and artful quality of Cleopatra's posturing. In both cases, the figure of Cleopatra symbolizes the art

[52] See Enid L. Duthie, *The Foreign Vision of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Barnes and Noble Book, 1975) 95.
[53] Jill Matus. "Looking at Cleopatra: The Expression and Exhibition of Desire in *Villette*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 21: 347.
[54] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism in Two Volumes: Volume One* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1960) 77.

object's power to seduce and, in the seduction of the viewer, to "deny things their truth and turn it into a game, a pure play of appearances."[55]

Yet, as Baudrillard has suggested, seduction depends on the willing complicity of the "seduced" with the "seducer," an implicit agreement between them to keep everything on the surface level, with signs rather than what those signs might signify. In the case of the art object, the image seduces the viewer by holding the attention to its formal features and diverting all attempts to see below that beautiful surface, to the network of social and economic factors that determine its meaning. Yet, in *Villette*, though the picture of Cleopatra is described as every bit the temptress as the real woman it is meant to represent, Lucy Snowe's aesthetic encounter with the painting is as great a failure of a seduction as anything in the fiction of Samuel Richardson. Lucy is unlike those earlier heroines in most respects; however, in her decided rejection of the solicitations of the spectacular image—in her refusal, as it were, to be charmed—she too turns in a virtuoso performance of personal virtue. What makes Lucy's engagement with the painting a performance of virtue is that she puts herself in a position where the painting could potentially work its spell on her. Rather than virtuously avoiding looking at the painting altogether (which is what, it is later suggested to her, propriety obliges her to do), she instead faces the temptation and withstands its solicitations. Looking at the painting with a critical eye, dwelling at length on its stratagems and flaws, she refuses to admire it in the way that the space of the gallery and the painting itself seem to demand. As she rather acerbically tells the reader, she will sit on the seat thoughtfully provided for her viewing pleasure for no other reason than "the bench was there" and she "might as well take advantage of its accommodation," not because, like the connoisseurs before her, she has any intention of being swept off her feet (276).

[55] Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991) Introduction.

Her description of the painting also demystifies its allure by humorously translating its aesthetic effects into different frames of value, where the odalisque does not fare nearly so well. The picture is first assessed using the language of the market-place and economic theory: imagining the figure of the Cleopatra as a "*commodity* of bulk," Lucy wonders whether her "Junoesque" form is worth the amount of "butcher's meat . . . bread, vegetables, and liquids" required for the attainment of "that *wealth* of muscle, that *affluence* of flesh" (275, italics mine). Lucy then speaks from a medical standpoint, and considering Cleopatra's reclining position on the sofa, finds reason to criticize her posture: "she appeared in hearty health . . . she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright" (275). Finally, she surveys the scene from the joint perspectives of social and domestic propriety, Mrs. Grundy and Mrs. Beeton combined, and, on this front, chastises Cleopatra both for her indifferent and indecent toilette ("she ought . . . to have worn decent garments, a gown covering her properly") as well as for the state of her abode ("for the wretched untidiness surrounding her, there could be no excuse" . . . strewn as it is with "pots and pans") (275). Voicing her resistance to the Cleopatra-as-painting through a sarcastic, scathing critique of the Cleopatra-as-woman, Lucy invokes the authority of different evaluative discourses and, in the process, demonstrates how that authority is attained through a performance of judgment that, in each instance, reifies social norms and results in the controlling objectification of the "feminine." Also, by using the language of the market, of medicine, and of domestic morality in her assessment of the picture, Lucy brings into the realm of the aesthetic the more sordid concerns and perspectives of the outside world and insists on their interrelatedness. The Cleopatra is not merely an enigmatic image, impervious to penetration; recontextualized (however satirically), she is the product of a complex and somewhat contradictory set of cultural scripts, scripts on which subjective judgments of taste also depend.

A spectacle exists primarily to be seen, its dazzling surface constantly threatening to overwhelm conscious thought through visual over-stimulation. Lucy's deliberate *mis*reading of the painting is only one of the strategies she employs to avoid succumbing to the visual spectacle. She simply refuses to view it as such. Her description also carefully avoids confronting the picture directly (as an image in its totality); instead she focuses on the details of its arrangement, stressing particularly its affectedness. Even her sole compliment to the painting—that "some of the details—as roses, gold cups, jewels, &c.—were very prettily painted"—undermines the Cleopatra's potential aesthetic effect by limiting its success to the competently pretty representation of various feminine trifles, so unimportant as to merit an "&c." Lucy further undermines the painting's claim to attention by contrasting those small details of roses, gold cups, and jewels, with details from a number of adjacently-situated "exquisite little pictures of still life: wild-flowers, wild-fruit, mossy wood-nests, casketing eggs that looked like pearls seen through clear green sea-water" (276). The comparison is an intricate one, working on a number of levels. Considered broadly, the artificiality of the Cleopatra, metonymically evoked through the list of cultivated and crafted objects, is set against the quasi-natural authenticity of the still lifes. Narrowing the focus still further, one sees that each detail in the first list has its complement or perhaps antithesis in the second: for the carefully-tended roses we have wild-flowers and fruit; for golden goblets we have more rustic receptacles, birds' nests; and for precious gemstones we have glossy-shelled eggs, poor man's pearls. The indirect comparison of these two sets of objects works to demystify and thus devalue the allure of the Cleopatra, mostly by drawing attention to the obviously provocative function of even the minutiae of the "coarse and preposterous canvas" (276). All luxury items, the roses, gold cups, and jewels that clutter the foreground of the painting are evocative of wealth, sensuousness, and, more crudely, female

genitalia; within the context of the painting, they reinforce the erotic promise of the odalisque. When offset by more natural symbolic equivalents—equivalents that suggest not feminine sexuality so much as fertility—they become little more than stage props, objects that have the appearance of value but are barren of any real meaning. In this passage, Lucy strives to dispel the magic of the spectacular image in the same way that she reveals the contrivances of museum space: by exposing the technical machinery behind the effects. Her final evaluation of the painting—that it is "on the whole an enormous piece of claptrap" (i.e. "a device or trick for catching applause" [OED])—only makes explicit what has inspired her antagonism in the first place—the self-conscious and manipulative theatricality of the Cleopatra, a theatricality that ultimately extends beyond the frame to include the dandified connoisseur on his "cushioned bench" mirroring the Egyptian odalisque on her sofa. Though Lucy herself sits on this bench, her engagement with the Cleopatra ridicules the facile, sensuous obsession with beautiful surfaces and demands a new standard of valuation, one based on the "truth" of the image.

Still, her means of engagement—the parody—has a performative element not wholly dissimilar to the behavior of the aesthetes from whom she is trying to distinguish herself. Thus, Lucy's surveillance of the spectacle (her skeptical, interrogative stance) involves her in a spectacle of surveillance, in which, as Joseph Litvak has argued, the act of viewing implicates the viewer in "a widespread social network of vigilance and visibility."[56] Hardly the disinterested spectator, Lucy's performance of viewership exposes what the situation of the painting—its arrangement, its protective cordons, its frame—is always attempting to conceal: the lack of fixed boundaries in the ever shifting relation between the viewer and the aesthetic object. The space of the museum is all about situating the viewer,

[56] Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1992) x.

positioning the viewer's body in such a way as to arrange a particular (perspectival, physical, intellectual, emotional) relation to the art object, one that implicitly encourages the viewer to adopt the cultural narrative which the space and its objects endorse. It is a fiction perpetuated by the museum, however, that viewers are interchangeable, that the individual does not bring to the viewing experience a unique perspective that influences how the art object is apprehended. Moreover, within the coded space of the museum, the relation between the viewer and other spectators is also unstable. Though the museum is ostensibly constructed to encourage individual perceptual experiences, that fact that others are witness to those experiences complicates and compromises the viewer's claim to authority. Thus Lucy, in the aftermath of her masterful deconstruction of the Cleopatra, finds herself in the gaze of M. Paul Emanuel, her school's professor of literature. Following on the heels of Lucy's observation that she need not heed the arrival of other spectators in the gallery, "as," she asserts, "indeed, it did not matter to me," M. Paul's intrusion throws her comment into a certain ironic relief:

> Suddenly a light tap visited my shoulder. Starting, turning, I met a face bent to encounter mine; a frowning, almost a shocked face it was.
>
> Que faites vous ici? said a voice. (276)

In a reversal of roles, Lucy finds herself sharply scrutinized by a sensibility as critical as her own. The abrupt visitation of this initially unidentified (and thus all the more peremptory) hand, "face," and "voice" breaks in upon her reverie in such a way as to remind Lucy and the reader that she is not outside the evaluative framework of the museum. Moreover, M. Paul's question ("What are you doing here?") initially threatens to undermine Lucy's carefully constructed aesthetic persona by doubting her right to be there in the first place. Emanuel's objection to Lucy's situation, though, has less to do with her presence in the museum than with her choice of viewing

material. A young, unmarried, and unaccompanied woman has decided for herself to sit before the Cleopatra. It is, as he tells her, a matter of propriety: "How dare you, a young person, sit coolly down, with the self-possession of a garçon, and look at *that* picture?" (277).

While Emanuel's critique is humorously rendered, his statements serve a larger purpose in Brontë's narrative anatomizing of the conventions of spectatorship. M. Paul recognizes in Lucy's self-possessed viewing of "*that* painting" the mark of a personality prone to insubordination. Aligning her quiet contemplation of the Cleopatra with something like the bold stare of a cheeky waiter, Emanuel locates Lucy's aesthetic experience within a distinctly social register. Evincing no interest in her subjective impressions of the painting, he instead focuses on the objective fact of her looking at it. His scandalized (over)reaction serves to move Lucy's interior monologue, her private act of viewership, into the public sphere, where her gaze becomes a contested object in an implicit struggle for power that plays out between the two of them. His subsequent attempt to redirect her attention to subjects more proper for female contemplation—which he does by physically moving her from the scene of the Cleopatra and towards a "quadtych" titled "La vie d'une femme"—only further evidences the social dynamics at work in the space of the museum. "La vie d'une femme," as Lucy notes, occupies not center stage like the Cleopatra but rather "a particularly dull corner," which is not especially surprising given the subject matter:

> The first [of the four panels] represented a 'Jeune Fille,' coming out of a church-door . . . her eyes cast down, her mouth pursed up—the image of a most villainous little precocious she-hypocrite. The second, a 'Mariée' with a long white veil, kneeling at a prie-dieu in her chamber . . . and showing the whites of her eyes in a most exasperating manner. The third, a 'Jeune Mère,' hanging disconsolate over a clayey and puffy baby . . . The fourth, a 'Veuve,' . . . holding by the hand a black little girl, and the twain studiously surveying an elegant French monument, set up in the corner of some Père la Chaise. All these four 'Anges' were grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts . . . Insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities!

> As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers. (277-278)

As other critics have observed, these images, also based on an actual triptych that Brontë viewed at the Brussels Salon, offer a clear contrast to the Cleopatra, an alternative construction of femininity that is more socially acceptable if every bit as androcentric. Characterizing the life of woman as defined by four stages—girlhood, married life, motherhood, and widowhood—the painting has an obviously didactic function, the progression of images reproducing a dominant narrative of bourgeois culture. Yet, the four panels are also united by a common feature, to which Lucy's description insistently draws attention. While all four women *look as* they are supposed to (insofar as all of the images offer cloyingly clichéd feminine ideals), they also *look where* they are supposed to. The gaze of each figure, as Lucy points out, is reverently—if weirdly disconsolately—directed towards an acceptable recipient of worship, be it God, baby, or dead husband. Yet, their concentration, it is intimated, is exaggerated to the point of artificiality, and ultimately, this posture of dutiful attention is seen to deprive them of materiality and vitality, rendering them as weirdly inhuman as excessive materiality does the Cleopatra.

When, subsequent to this description, Lucy declares that "it was impossible to keep one's attention long confined to these masterpieces," she is arguably stating a psychological imperative more than an aesthetic opinion. To "confine" her attention to "Le vie d'une femme" would be to replicate the conventional performance of viewership that turned those depicted female figures into "bloodless, brainless nonentities" and to senselessly reenact the social scripts that inform such images. For Lucy's gaze to remain fixed on the painting would also entail her opting out of the strange game of mutual surveillance in which she and M. Paul are engaged. When she defies his edict and turns to "survey the gallery," her disobedient roving eye meets his

controlling one: "I noticed, by the way, that he looked at [the Cleopatra] himself quite at his ease, and for a very long while: he did not, however, neglect to glance from time to time my way, in order, I suppose, to make sure that I was obeying orders, and not breaking bounds" (278). The interplay of their glances—an interplay that also includes the two paintings—creates a dynamic of authority and rebellion. M. Paul's gaze strives to police Lucy's by keeping it restricted to the safe boundaries of one particular image, while Lucy's gaze escapes its confines in order to secretly survey its would-be jailer and the world outside its jail.

In many ways, it is the coded space of the gallery itself that lends to their interactions such a dramatic charge, since Lucy, in defying M. Paul, is also defying the social conventions that determine and differentiate aesthetic experiences. Lucy's refusal to obey his "orders" is part and parcel of her broader resolve to come to her own conclusions about the images in the gallery, regardless of (in the words of Tony Bennett) the institutional "theories" implicit in the space's "layout." When M. Paul, in the traditional position of the male pedagogue, again instructs her to "turn to the wall and study your four pictures of a woman's life," his authority rests on the assumption that there is something morally elevating for women about the pictures (280). Lucy's response—that "they are too hideous"—appeals to a different standard of valuation. They deliberately talk at cross-purposes; he attends to the pictures' meanings, while she focuses on their form. Similarly, when she asks him what he thinks of the Cleopatra, his answer is consciously evasive: "Une femme superbe . . . des formes de Junon, mais une personne dont je ne voudrais ni pour femme, ni pour fille, ni pour soeur" [a superb woman, the form of Juno, but not a person I would wish for a wife, or a daughter, or a sister] (280). That a half-naked Junoesque female form is typically intended to evoke for the viewer his mother, sister, or daughter seems incredible, as does Emanuel's omission of the most obvious role for the Cleopatra—that of

paramour and general object of masculine desire. By eliding the sexual appeal of the Cleopatra, though, he remains consistent in his attempt to shield Lucy, as an unaccompanied "demoiselle," from a corrupting erotic subtext of which she is supposed to be ignorant. Meanwhile, Lucy's pert declaration that, in spite of his efforts, she can "see her [the Cleopatra] quite well from this corner" shows the failure of his efforts as well as her determination to claim for herself an independent perspective.

Through Lucy Snowe and M. Paul Emanuel's spectatorial battle-of-wills, Brontë reveals the hierarchies of power that structure aesthetic experience. Lucy's taunting and disobedient gaze further denaturalizes those accepted practices of viewership by refusing to train itself on subjects proper to its class, gender, and station. In her final, half-teasing affront to M. Paul, she sets her sights on something even more objectionable to the schoolmaster than the Cleopatra: a group of male spectators that have gathered before the odalisque. Asking Emanuel to "move an inch to the side," Lucy's clearly-directed stare draws from him the shocked question, "How! At what are you gazing now? You are not recognizing an acquaintance amongst that group of jeunes gens?" (281). M. Paul's question is again less a request for information than a chastening of any inclination to openly "recognize" a young man in public, such an acknowledgement implying a suspect familiarity. Lucy does admit to knowing one of the men—a young Belgian dandy, Alfred de Hamal, who is courting Lucy's student and countrywoman, Ginerva Fanshawe—but her reaction is at once less public and more radical than the social gesture that Emanuel expects. Contemplating de Hamal as he in turn ogles the Cleopatra, Lucy commences a scathing—if wholly internal—parody of the gentleman-aesthete, a parody made all the more subversive for having another gentleman-aesthete as the object of the desiring gaze:

> In fact, I had caught a glimpse of a head too pretty to belong to any other than the redoubted Colonel de Hamal. What a very finished, highly-polished little pate it was! What a figure, so trim and natty! What womanish feet and hands! How daintily he held a glass to one of his optics! With what admiration he tittered and whispered to a friend at his elbow! Oh, the man of sense! Oh, the refined gentleman of superior taste and tact! I observed him for about ten minutes, and perceived that he was exceedingly taken with the dusk and portly Venus of the Nile. (281)

A series of trite exclamations redundantly studded with exclamation points, Lucy's sketch of de Hamal uses the conventions of polite viewership against one of its more skilled practitioners. Her language plays with the typical gendering of the aesthetic relation to throw into relief the "feminine" preoccupation with physical appearance that characterizes the fop. Her deliberately objectifying gaze carves him up into pieces; de Hamal's "finished" pate, his "womanish" appendages, his "natty" figure all mark him as artificial a creation as the Cleopatra. Moreover, his manner of observation—the "dainty" use of a monocle, while "titter[ing]" to a friend—is as affected as the way in which Lucy describes him. In the scene before her, Lucy is presented with the realization of the aesthetic encounter that she believes the situation of the Cleopatra to encourage. De Hamal is the epitome of the swooning connoisseur, posed in front of the canvas, caught up in an act of aesthetic- and self-admiration. That a "hamal" is an "Oriental porter" and a "palanquin-bearer" [OED] seems important in this context, as it is on de Hamal's shoulders that the Cleopatra's reputation figuratively rests. As the "refined gentleman of superior taste and tact," he is representative of those cultural forces that govern the aesthetic standards and practices inscribed in the museum. As Lucy's depiction of de Hamal takes pains to point out, though, the emptily performative nature of this variety of aesthetic experience creates a closed circuit of mutually-reinforcing subjects and objects. It is a hollow kind of appreciation insofar as it simply reifies those social codes that determine the experience in the first place.

Yet, if *Villette* is unsparing in its critique of cultural ciphers like the Cleopatra and de Hamal (objects and subjects that only simulate, offering a parody that is vacant of meaning), it does not advocate a return to an earlier, less self-conscious mode of aesthetic engagement. Instead, in the gallery scene, Brontë imagines a variety of perspectives and scenarios through which she can explore the complexities of the aesthetic encounter as it occurs in spaces created for acts of viewership. For Brontë, the individual's response to the prescriptive nature of such spaces provides the greatest insight into the intricacies of spectatorship, intricacies to which she was first introduced through her reading of *Modern Painters.* Near the chapter's conclusion, Brontë's indebtedness to Ruskin again shows itself in her attempt to create a character that in some aspects approximates his ideally *theoretic* viewer, a viewer who responds to beauty with not just the senses but with his "moral being." This figure, though, significantly is not Lucy Snowe but rather Dr. John Graham Bretton, and again, Lucy bears witness as he too encounters the art object that has evoked such revealing responses from the other characters.

After Lucy's extensive observation of de Hamal—an observation so intense, perhaps purposely so, that it causes M. Paul "to withdraw voluntarily"—her "pursuant" eye lights upon a fitting contrast to the Belgian dandy in the form of Dr. John, the man who brought her to the gallery: "He approached de Hamal; he paused near him; I thought he had a pleasure in looking over his head; Dr. Bretton, too, gazed on the Cleopatra. I doubt if it were to his taste: he did not simper like the little Count; his mouth looked fastidious, his eye cool" (281). Choosing to remain herself unobserved, Lucy watches Bretton and de Hamal as they contemplate the Cleopatra in close proximity to each other. As Lucy knows, the two are bound in more ways than the shared object of their gaze. They are also rivals for the affections of Ginevra Fanshawe, and the moment, as Lucy reads it, is charged with that significance. The

Cleopatra functions as a placeholder for the absent Ginevra, and Dr. John's reaction to the painting underscores the differences between the men. Whereas de Hamal is "taken" by the sensuality of the image, Dr. John is faintly repulsed by it. He is not an admirer but a judge, and in his "cool eye" and "fastidious" mouth, Lucy reads a different standard of valuation from de Hamal's and also from Emanuel's. His "taste" (as opposed to the others') depends on his ethics, and thus the provocative beauty of the Cleopatra does not engage his aesthetic sensibilities because its subject and style is, for him, morally objectionable. When Lucy finally announces her presence to Dr. John and joins him, they discuss various artworks in the gallery, including the Cleopatra. Lucy admires his unpretentious manner of aesthetic discourse: "without pretending to be a connoisseur, he always spoke his thought, and that was sure to be fresh: very often it was also just and pithy" (282). Still, that Dr. John *always* speaks his mind but is only *very often* "just" in his evaluations leaves open the possibility that even the theoretic viewer has a blind-spot, a particular point on which his judgments are compromised by certain prejudices. His evaluation of the Cleopatra hints at what that prejudice might be: "Pooh! . . . My mother is a better-looking woman. I heard some French fops, yonder, designating her as 'le type du voluptueux;' I can only say, 'le voluptueux' is little to my liking. Compare that mulatto to Ginerva!" (282) If Dr. John's insensibility to the Cleopatra is "fresh"—setting him apart from the other viewers in the museum—it nevertheless is underwritten by a rather (f)rigid set of beliefs and principles. His last statement is also unconsciously ironic; Ginerva, in spite of her pale and slim English beauty, is a heartless flirt who has been relentlessly teasing Dr. John while encouraging the attentions of de Hamal, making her more akin to the Cleopatra than the "graceful angel" to which the doctor has previously compared her (222). Dr. John's inability to compare Ginevra and "that mulatto" (a descriptor freezing with ugly contempt) falls short of Lucy's perspicacity in at least

one respect: he is blind to how this aesthetic encounter visually reproduces the love triangle in which he occupies one anguished corner.

In the strange spatial and perspectival triangulation of the Cleopatra, de Hamal, and Bretton, Lucy's (and Brontë's) sympathies clearly are with Dr. John, but this radically relativistic narrative reveals the limitations of even his perspective: it puts him, as it were, in a narrative frame. This framing of Dr. John in the Cleopatra chapter has a precedent in Lucy's only other recorded encounter with an art object: a childhood encounter with a portrait of Bretton as a youth, when he was simply known to her as "Graham." Coming across the picture a second time when she crosses paths with Dr. John in Villette, Lucy recalls that the

> portrait used to hang in the breakfast-room, over the mantel-place: somewhat too high, as I thought. I well remember how I used to mount a music-stool for the purpose of unhooking it, holding it in my hand, and searching into those bonny wells of eyes, whose glance under their hazel lashes seemed like a penciled laugh; and well I liked to note the colouring of the cheek, and the expression of the mouth. I hardly believed fancy could improve on the curve of that mouth, or of the chin; even *my* ignorance knew that both were beautiful, and pondered, perplexed over this doubt: 'How it was that what charmed so much, could at the same time so deeply pain? (243)

That Lucy finds in the "bonny wells" of the portrait's eyes a "glance" is yet another example of Brontë's beliefs that the viewing subject is never outside of the boundaries of surveillance and that every attempt to perceive something always also reveals something of oneself. The beauty attributed to the mouth is also quite telling, as it seems to signify that "whatever sentiment met him in form too facile, his lips menaced, beautifully but surely, caprice and light esteem" (243). What is truly beautiful in Brontë's system of aesthetics, this description suggests, is also what is most menacing, in that it stands in judgment of whatever "sentiment" or consciousness chooses to meet it. To engage in aesthetic contemplation is to commit oneself to a particular perspective, thereby situating oneself within a larger socio-ideological

framework. Brontë's depiction of museum-space attempts to manifest this framework through her heroine's performative anatomizing of the internal and external factors that inform aesthetic judgment. In the characters of M. Paul Emanuel, Colonel de Hamal, and Graham Bretton, Brontë showcases different incarnations of a largely Ruskinian conception of self-conscious spectatorship but also insists upon what these characters and Ruskin himself fail to acknowledge: the material and institutional forces that contextualize and, to some degree, determine what the viewer is capable of taking from aesthetic encounter.

In many ways, Lucy's question to herself regarding Graham's portrait—How it was that what charmed so much, could at the same time so deeply pain?—gets to the heart of what distinguishes Brontë from Ruskin and Brontë's heroine from the other viewers with whom she both openly and secretly interacts throughout her experience at the gallery. Lucy's appreciation of Graham's portrait is tempered by an unhappy semi-awareness of the circumstances surrounding and shaping that appreciation. As she acknowledges of the portrait, "any romantic little school-girl might almost have loved [it] in its frame" (243); she, at that time, is just one such romantic little school-girl, and to love it uncritically, without distance and without consciousness of one's circumstances, is to remain willfully blind to the shaping influences of the outside world. Even the most transcendent of aesthetic experiences emerges from the crucible of context, and by choosing a relativistic independence of gaze, Lucy is able to see outside the frame of the aesthetic system, consequently gaining for herself the painful knowledge of her own perceptual limitations that the Ruskinian aesthete has forgotten to remember.

CHAPTER 3.

"A Difficult Kind of Shorthand": An Aesthetic Translation of History in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

When *Villette* was published in 1853, George Eliot could not adequately express her enthusiasm for the novel without the liberal use of exclamation points: "*Villette! Villette!* Have you read it? . . . It is a still more wonderful book than *Jane Eyre*. There is something almost preternatural in its power."[57] Though pertaining to the novel as a whole, Eliot's celebration of *Villette's* "almost preternatural power" also gestures towards one particular aspect of that text: its fascination with a realm of experience itself in some ways "beyond nature"—that of aesthetic affect. Brontë's narrative representation of a Ruskinian conception of spectatorship (the focus of the previous chapter) strives to demystify the museum experience, particularly the power of the space to shape viewers' responses to the art on display. In revealing the complexity of cultural scripts informing even the most banal of aesthetic encounters, *Villette* situates individual acts of perception within a broader social context, deriving a strange energy from its heroine's combative—if largely interiorized—engagements with art works and other viewers.

George Eliot's fascination with *Villette* and with that novel's engagement with aesthetic matters offers a useful point of entry into *Middlemarch* (1871-72, 1874), long regarded as an exemplar of Victorian realism. As Harry Shaw has argued, one of the great myths of literary realism is that its adherents trafficked in "transparent representation," offering the reader unmediated access into the historical moment being represented.[58] That *Middlemarch*'s sprawling, multi-threaded narrative thwarts

[57] George Eliot, "GE to Mrs. Charles Bray," 15 February [1853], *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon Haight, Vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954) 87.
[58] Harry Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999) 38-39.

this expectation complicates its reception history, leading to comments like Henry James's:

> In spite of these faults . . . [*Middlemarch*] remains a very splendid performance. It sets the limit, we think, to the development of the old-fashioned English novel. Its diffuseness, on which we have touched, makes it too copious a dose of pure fiction. If we write novels so, how shall we write history?[59]

Putting aside the irony of the author of *The Golden Bowl* criticizing another for the copiousness of a fictional dosage, the "diffuseness" that he identifies as a structural flaw in the novel might also be read as a deliberate narrative strategy, one that (as with *Villette*) has its roots in nineteenth-century aesthetic theory and finds expression in the performative space of the museum. It is a strategy that has everything to do with the subtitle of Eliot's novel—"a study of provincial life," not, significantly, a study of provincial *lives* or a study of *a* provincial life. Rather, in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot attempts to capture the quiddity of a particular moment—a market town in the Midlands in the 1830s, just prior to the Reform Bill—through a dissemination of perspectives, each one providing a fragmentary glimpse of the complete historical picture. For James, this method of storytelling is problematic because it seems more akin to the writing of history than the writing of fiction. Yet perhaps Eliot was trying to blur this categorical distinction by substituting for a focused and focalized imaginative reflection on an era more diffusive refractions of one.

If *Middlemarch* refracts rather than reflects history through the lens of narrative, has Eliot (as James supposes) sacrificed some fundamental artistic principle for the sake of historical veracity? That Eliot herself thought otherwise can be inferred from her review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, in which she states that

[59] Henry James, unsigned review of *Middlemarch,* by George Eliot, *Galaxy,* XV March 1873: 428.

> [t]he aim of Art, in depicting any natural object, is to produce in the mind analogous emotions to those produced by the object itself; but as with all our skill and care we cannot imitate it exactly, this aim is not attained by *transcribing*, but by *translating* it into the language of Art.[60]

Building off Ruskin, Eliot's description of the artistic process intriguingly reframes the former's insistence that the artist must "go to nature."[61] As Eliot explains it, the "aim of Art" in the depiction of some real object is to engender in the viewer feelings that are structurally similar to those evoked by the object itself. But because an object can never be imitated "exactly" by the artist, regardless of "skill and care," the representation cannot work on the sensibilities of the viewer in the same way as does the object. Rather, success in artistic representation depends on clearly recognizing the emotions that the object produces and finding an alternate means of communicating those emotions to others. With *transcription*, one is a copyist, reproducing the form as faithfully as possible. *Translation*, though, transfers the substance or content of the thing from its native medium into another, with the goal of communicating what was formerly incomprehensible to a particular audience. Transcription is a process of recording, but translation is a mode of communication. This difference would have been important to Eliot, herself a translator of Strauss, Feuerbach, and Spinoza, and when she describes Art as itself a language, she has a greater sense than most writers of the implications of such a claim. To take Eliot's argument one step farther, if Art is a language into which certain universal feelings are translated, then those whose aesthetic experiences allow them to "read" it are, like the artist, in possession of an idiom that has wholly to do with individual and collective

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[60] George Eliot, *A Writer's Notebook, 1854-1879, and Uncollected Writings Uncollected Writings,* ed. Joseph Wiesenfarth (Charlottesville: UVA Press, 1981) 240.

[61] Joseph Wiesenfarth, in "Middlemarch: The Language of Art" (*PMLA* 97:3, 1982) first referenced this passage of Eliot's review in relation to *Middlemarch.* He argues that Dorothea's initial ignorance regarding aesthetic issues creates a divide between her conscious moral sense and her unconscious sensibilities, a divide that can only be reconciled by becoming fluent in a Ruskinian "language of art," as this "language leads artist and critic to the true, the beautiful, and the good, which are essential to both a moral art and a moral life" (365).

impressions. Also, if art objects, like words, are seen as signifiers for otherwise indescribable emotional signifieds, then they can be used to make visible and intelligible to oneself and to others what otherwise would remain an untranslatable aspect of subjective experience.

In *Middlemarch*, the city of Rome and, more specifically, the Papal collection of ancient sculpture housed in the Vatican offer vehicles for exploring the narrative possibilities of the language of Art. The honeymoon destination of the novel's heiress-heroine, Dorothea Brooke, and her husband, the scholar Edward Casaubon, Rome provides a museum-like space in which to stage the couple's growing recognition of their intrinsic incompatibility, which is brought home through a series of contrasting aesthetic encounters. For Casaubon, aesthetic experience presents another opportunity for demonstrating erudition; his "way of commenting on the strangely impressive objects around them" is to repeat accepted opinions culled from guidebooks, delivering these pronouncements "in a measured official tone, as of a clergyman reading according to the rubric."[62] Set against this pedantic deference to authority—a deference that all but extinguishes affect—Dorothea's unschooled but passionate grapplings with the language of the great works of art she encounters suggest an innate responsiveness to and interest in these sorts of experiences, which will increasingly put her at odds with her husband. In this way, Rome and its community of would-be aesthetes serve as backdrop, audience, and catalyst for Dorothea's developing aesthetic sensibilities and her burgeoning awareness of her own deep unhappiness in her new marriage. The only section of the novel not set in or near the Midlands town of Middlemarch, Rome (Book II: Old and Young, Ch. XIX-XXII) offers an experiment into how the discourse of art might be used to represent both personal and more collective moments of change. In her characters'

[62] George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study in Provincial Life*, ed. Gregory Maertz (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004) 182-183. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

engagements with art culture, Eliot personalizes and dramatizes some of the major aesthetic theories and debates of the day, in the process demonstrating how aesthetic experience provides a means of giving shape and expression to previously indefinable emotions, ideas and desires. The scenes of aesthetic engagement in this Roman interlude also serve as an analogue to the structuring process of the novel itself, bringing into focus Eliot's understanding of how the novel goes about assembling perspectival fragments in order to refract the broader historical picture, the "life" of which *Middlemarch* announces itself a study. Competing points of view on the same art object recreate in miniature the diffusion of storylines that James critiqued in *Middlemarch*, a diffusion that follows from Eliot's conception of how meaning is translated and disseminated through the dynamic exchange between viewer and object in the moment of aesthetic encounter.

The scene in the Vatican Museum which opens the Rome chapters is one of the more exhaustively dissected in Eliot scholarship. Joseph Wiesenfarth, Hugh Witemeyer, and more recently, Abigail Rischin all have considered how this episode reflects Eliot's efforts to incorporate her knowledge of the visual arts into the fabric of the narrative.[63] When Casaubon leaves Dorothea behind in the statue galleries, she becomes the unwitting object of attention of two aesthetes, her husband's cousin and ward, the young Englishman-abroad, Will Ladislaw, and the German pseudo-Nazarene painter, Adolf Naumann, whose eye is captivated by Dorothea's pose of "brooding abstraction." Naumann's ecstatic descriptions of her as a potential model raises the proprietary ire of the poetical Ladislaw, who argues that "[y]our painting and Plastik are poor stuff . . . Language is a finer medium" (178). Though lasting only a moment (Dorothea becomes conscious of the presence of "the two strangers" and

[63] Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979); Joseph Wiesenfarth, "Middlemarch: The Language of Art," *PMLA* 97: 3 (1982): 363-67; Abigail S. Rischin, "Beside the Reclining Statue: Ekphrasis, Narrative, and Desire in *Middlemarch*," *PMLA* 111:5 (1996): 1121-32.

leaves the room), the "picture" she unconsciously creates, her figure set against the backdrop of the gallery, is the indirect cause of everything that subsequently unfolds in Rome, most importantly her reacquaintance with Ladislaw, who, in turn, causes her to recognize her husband's emotional and intellectual impotence. In this brief narrative framing of Dorothea, Eliot creates a scenario structured around and through acts of viewership. The sculpture gallery provides a frame within which the admiration of Ladislaw and Naumann transforms her from an attractive woman into an aesthetic object, as Eliot's description suggests:

> the two figures passed lightly along by the Meleager towards the hall where the reclining Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra, lies in the marble voluptuousness of her beauty, the drapery folding around her with a petal-like ease and tenderness. They were just in time to see another figure standing against the pedestal near the reclining marble: a breathing blooming girl, whose form, not shamed by the Ariadne, was clad in Quakerish gray drapery . . . one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek. (176)

Past the statue of Meleager and towards the room containing the "Ariadne, then . . . Cleopatra," the two friends' movements are charted in relation to widely-known works of ancient sculpture, underscoring the fact that within the space of the museum, the ostensible purpose of all movement is to change the perspective of viewing and the subject being viewed. As the last of the objects sighted and described—an "object" all the more so because she is first identified as simply "another figure"—Dorothea is swept up in the aestheticizing gaze directed towards the Ariadne/Cleopatra. The seamlessness of tone as the focus shifts from the stone woman to the real one suggests that the viewers have integrated them both into the same evaluative framework. As Rischin has noted, calling Dorothea's body a "form" and her clothing "drapery" renders her an empty body with artistically arranged clothing, as empty of consciousness and as carefully posed as the piece of "marble voluptuousness" she stands next to. More subtly, the perceived connection between the reclining figure and

Dorothea extends even to the level of connotation; the "petal-like ease" of cloth over body in the Ariadne/Cleopatra has a flower-like delicacy also conveyed by the "blooming, breathing" figure of Dorothea, the statue's "reclining" posture a slumberous listlessness also conveyed by Dorothea's hand "pillowed" on her cheek. The men are also enthralled by what Michael Fried would call the "absorption" of the two figures, the sculpture (in Naumann's words) depicting "antique beauty . . . arrested in the complete contentment of its sensuous perfection" and Dorothea with "her large eyes . . . fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight which fell across the floor" (176). In both figures, the raptness of their pose is read as an invitation to the gaze; self-absorption is given an erotic charge in virtue of the fact that it allows the viewer to openly and unabashedly objectify the figure before him.

If the theory behind and layout of the museum encourages a generally objectifying perspective from its visitors, as Eliot suggests, this perspective is reinforced by the superfluity of symbolism that the educated viewer is able to derive from and read into the art object. Naumann's appreciation of Dorothea also stems from the "fine bit of antithesis" that he sees her offering to what in the 1830s was still thought to be a representation of the dying Cleopatra.[64] While the Cleopatra is an image of ancient, pagan beauty, "not corpse-like even in death," Dorothea appears to him as "beauty in its breathing life, with the consciousness of Christian centuries in its bosom" (176). Naumann's familiarity with the story of Cleopatra and (as in the previous section) the commonly-held associations of the Egyptian queen with a kind of exotic, dangerously seductive carnality underwrites his reading of the scene before

[64] It is generally accepted that Adolf Naumann is mainly modeled on the Nazarene painter Johann Friedrich Overbeck, whose Roman studio Eliot visited in 1860. Precursors to the Pre-Raphaelites, the Nazarenes were similarly interested in bringing back a pre-High-Renaissance simplicity and vividness of color, and their paintings were full of spiritual symbolism and often sought to convey complex religious and historical narratives. I would also make the observation that Naumann's first name could be a tribute to Adolf Stahr, the German art historian whose book *Torso* takes its title from the statue of the Belvedere Torso, mentioned at the beginning of Chapter XIX, and contains a discussion on the history of the Ariadne/Cleopatra.

him, as does his investment in certain historical narratives. Naumann's interpretation of the picturesque configuration of woman and statue seems a means of validating a rather self-serving story of historical change, the transition of Western civilization from the classical era to the Christian, from an artistic tradition characterized by a sensuous preoccupation with form to one concerned with the spiritual meaning of the image. When he next goes on, in a particularly Hegelian maneuver, to merge the thesis of the Cleopatra with the antithesis of Dorothea into a pictorial synthesis—describing a painting he might do of Dorothea alone as "antique form animated by Christian sentiment—a sort of Christian Antigone—sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion," he collapses the already strained allegory of aesthetic conflict into one overfull symbolic feminine receptacle. In Naumann's imagined painting of Dorothea, she is the embodiment and subject *par excellence* of the manner of art that he has devoted himself to creating.

Ladislaw's sarcastic response illuminates the subtext of Naumann's proposed portrait, mocking the painter for his unstated assumption that the portrait would be "the chief outcome of her existence—the divinity passing into higher completeness and all but exhausted in the act of covering [his] bit of canvas" (177). Eliot represents Will as savvy enough to play the Feuerbach to Naumann's Hegel—pointing out to him how the belief that "the universe is straining towards the obscure significance of your picture" is nothing more than absurd projection of Naumann's own egotism and need for divine justification for his desire to paint.[65] Yet, Ladislaw's critique of Naumann ultimately does not seek to discredit this belief so much as to underscore the unfitness of the painter's chosen medium of expression. Claiming that Naumann "want[s] to

[65] Eliot's translation of Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (*The Essence of Christianity*, trans. 1853) might have informed this exchange between Naumann and Ladislaw, in the same way that their subsequent discussion is structured around Lessing's *Laokoön*.

express too much with [his] painting," he then goes to label this problem as one inherent to painting as an art form:

> After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection. I feel that especially about representations of women. As if a woman were a mere coloured superficies! You must wait for movement and tone . . . they change from moment to moment.—This woman . . . how would you paint her voice, pray? But her voice is much diviner than anything you have seen of her." (178)

This speech develops the chapter's insistent allusion to Lessing's *Laokoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* [1766, trans. 1836]. Arguing against an overly literal understanding of *ut pictura poesis,* Lessing differentiates the representational strategies of painting from poetry, painting unfolding spatially and poetry temporally. George Eliot herself reviewed *Laokoön* in 1856 for the *Westminster Review,* and her approving observation therein of Lessing's "masterly distinction" between "the materials wherewith the poet and the painter or sculptor respectively work" and "their mode of appeal to the mind" takes on a rather pugilistic incarnation in Naumann and Ladislaw's debate, as they engage in a game of artistic one-upmanship as to which method of presentation is more accurately expressive.[66] The eloquence of each character has been read to signify the author's endorsement of opposing positions, with Witemeyer finding that "the novel supports Will's view of the limitations of painting" and Rischin averring that "Eliot undercuts rather than supports her character's critique of the visual arts."[67]

That both readings can be strongly defended reveals a crucial element of Eliot's ethics of narrative: she must adequately and fairly represent even theoretical positions which she does not share. Moreover, Eliot's efforts here are not

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[66] George Eliot, "Belles Lettres," *Westminster Review* 66, October 1856, re-published in *A Writer's Notebook, 1854-1879, and Uncollected Writings* 285. The Westminster Review is the same periodical that later would publish anonymously Pater's articles, "Coleridge's Writings" (1866) and "Winckelmann" (1867), a point of note when considering the following chapter.
[67] Witemeyer 42; Rischin 1121.

programmatic; striving to clearly articulate both sides of the argument, she shows herself interested less in defending any particular aesthetic concept than in using these concepts to broaden the scope of her fiction, illuminating the ways in which even small personal dramas are both informed by and evocative of larger philosophical and cultural debates. In this scene, some of these influences are more obvious, at least to a fairly knowledgeable reader. For example, Ladislaw and Naumann begin to argue the merits of the verbal and visual arts in the Vatican museum, where the statue of Laocoön is housed, linking their conversation to the unmentioned Lessing, whose theories become all the more suggestive for being only indirectly referenced. Other influences take us not just outside the text but to other points within it. Will's sense of the divine quality of Dorothea's voice—a divinity whose temporal quality can only be conveyed through poetry—stems from his first impression from many months previously that her voice "was like the voice of a soul that had once lived in an Aeolian harp" (90). The harp being one of the major symbols of the Romantic movement in which Ladislaw is an ardent participant, his description also evokes more specifically Coleridge's poem "The Aeolian Harp" (1795), wherein the poet ponders the nature of creation, both divine and human:

> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversly fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God of all ? (44-48)

An instrument played upon by Nature itself, Coleridge's Aeolian harp is an analogue for the mind of the poet, whose inspiration is fitfully evoked from a divine presence immanent in the world. Will's two descriptions of Dorothea's voice echo aspects of this poetic image in a revealing way. Ladislaw's second reference to this "divine" voice is part of a broader challenge to Naumann—an argument not against the

painter's objectifying gaze but on behalf of a different method of objectification. In his view, visual "representations of women" are always inadequate because, in their "tone and movement," women "change from moment to moment." Like the intermittent "plastic" "intellectual breeze" of which Coleridge speaks, women, to Ladislaw, are dynamic forces that can only be truthfully rendered in the verbal medium of poetry. Thus, when looking back to Will's earlier description of Dorothea's voice—not as the Aeolian harp itself but as the "soul" that once inhabited it—it becomes clear that from the beginning he thinks of her as an object or instrument of inspiration. For Ladislaw, a painting can never fully convey the complexity of one's impression; it is thus always a failure, and the artist's awareness of failure is projected onto the object, which takes on an accusing and defiant look, "staring at [its creator] with an insistent imperfection" (178). Poetry, though, channels the inspiring object through the consciousness of the poet, making the finished product a testament to the transformative powers of the imagination. Ladislaw would substitute Naumann's blank canvas for a lute, but, as Eliot's chain of buried allusions suggests, both men perceive the scene before them as one which calls for the shaping consciousness of the artist to bring it to a more meaningful state of being.

In Naumann and Ladislaw's hectic and competitive aestheticizing of Dorothea against the pedestal of the Ariadne/Cleopatra, the surfeit of symbolism and significance that they seek to embody in these female forms exemplifies Kathy Psomiades's argument that "femininity" works within nineteenth-century aestheticism as a "signifying system" which mediates between the realms of art and culture.[68] Certainly, as Eliot demonstrates in this scene, the painter and the would-be poet are supported by a long-standing aesthetic tradition of trafficking in the bodies of beautiful women, Cleopatra, Ariadne, the Madonna, and Antigone, just to name a few.

[68] Kathy Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 2-3.

Yet if this net of intertextual references illustrates the ways in which real people and real experiences are put in the service of the aesthetic, it also shows how aesthetic experiences serve to make things more real to people, the relation between viewer and art object functioning as a model for other, more social forms of interaction. Ladislaw feels the stirrings of romantic feeling towards Dorothea, for instance, only after he is able to view her with a modicum of aesthetic detachment—to think about their relationship as that of an unattainable female object to a yearning masculine subject. Though he denies even the possibility of capturing the scene before him in a visual medium, the act of viewing it aesthetically allows him to recognize that "something had happened with him in regard to" Dorothea (178). As a detached spectator, Ladislaw finds a means of articulating a previously unavowed desire for his cousin's wife. From an aesthetic perspective, he can admire Dorothea in a way that would otherwise be unseemly—even, given Casaubon's patronage, treacherous.

Of course, even if Will worships Dorothea with "Faith that inly *feels*" (to again quote Coleridge), it is almost impossible to distinguish his admiration of the actual woman from her power to embody his own deeply-held aesthetic convictions. While different from Naumann's, Ladislaw's habit of viewing displays a kind of blindness that comes from desiring to *see into* the object in order to use it as a means of inspiring emotion and creativity. In a later conversation with Dorothea, Ladislaw describes the "poet" as having

> a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. (202-203)

As Dorothea observes, this tribute to the poet rather curiously "leave[s] out the poems," the artifacts that are supposed to result from the world-soul wafting over the poet's harp-like sensibilities. Will's omission here fits a larger pattern; though he

professes to desire a vocation in the arts, he evinces very little interest in actually creating or producing anything. For him, artistry is a means to sensibility, not the other way around. Besides, if his comment to Dorothea—that she herself "[is] a poem . . . what makes up the poet's consciousness in his best moods"—reflects what he truly believes, he has no reason to write poetry, the world having already thoughtfully provided an embodiment of all he might otherwise been motivated to express. In this way, Will's theory of poetry displays a sense of entitlement not all that different from Naumann's. Eliot underscores the solipsistic bent to Will's aestheticism by linking it to his broader worldview: "There are characters which are continually creating collisions and nodes for themselves in dramas which nobody is prepared to act with them. Their susceptibilities will clash against objects that remain innocently quiet" (178). This somewhat pitying commentary on Ladislaw's "susceptibilities" has the curious effect of casting back over the narrative scene just staged with a distancing, aestheticizing gaze. While Ladislaw is the ostensible subject of the observation, Eliot's description of his character as a type speaks to the general situation outlined in this chapter, specifically to the strange clash of perspectives between Naumann and Ladislaw, at the center of which collision is the "innocently quiet" Dorothea.

The isolated viewer, trapped in an internal drama of his own making, transforms objects of vision into a coherent picture by means of his framing perspective. Eliot works to situate the pictures of Ladislaw and Naumann within the narrative frame of intellectual history, replicating in miniature the contemporary cultural debates which were elsewhere being waged on a much grander scale. The spatial triangulation of the two aesthetes and their chosen object allows Eliot to map the process by which hermeneutic conflicts [differences in theories of interpretation] lead to perceptual differences [in how people actually see]. The scene offers no overt

drama; the dispute never escalates into a confrontation that requires resolution, nor do the two men intrude upon the reverie of the woman they are admiring. Yet the narrative implications are quietly momentous, especially in the case of the third viewer: the beautiful object otherwise known as Dorothea Casaubon. It is not until the end of the next chapter that Eliot returns to the Vatican museum and refers once more to Dorothea "in that brooding abstraction which made her pose remarkable." In this instance, though, instead of focusing on how Dorothea is seen by others, the emphasis is shifted to what Dorothea herself both sees and does not see at that particular moment:

> She did not really see the streak of sunlight on the floor more than she saw the statues: she was inwardly seeing the light of years to come in her own home and over English fields and elms and hedge-bordered highroads; and feeling that the way in which they might be filled with joyful devotedness was not so clear to her as it might have been. (187)

On the one hand, Dorothea's experience in the sculpture gallery bears little resemblance to the more obvious acts of aesthetic appreciation by her two admirers. She lacks both the focus and the knowledge of her surroundings necessary to organize the scene before her into a meaningful tableau. Nevertheless, as for Ladislaw and Naumann, the moment in the gallery is a catalyst of sorts for Dorothea, inspiring a coming-to-awareness that is the hallmark of Eliot's understanding of aesthetic experience. As the substance of Dorothea's vision makes clear, though, this newfound awareness is hardly epiphanic. It is the culmination of a protracted process of aesthetic awakening, a process that began early in the novel, as Dorothea and her sister Celia sorted through her dead mother's jewels and she was struck by another significant gleam of light.

In this earlier scene, Dorothea—with the ascetic fervor that underwrites many of her decisions—means to renounce her claim to all of her mother's jewelry until,

opening a ring box, she sees "a fine emerald with diamonds, and just then the sun passing beyond a cloud sent a bright gleam over the table" (39). Captivated by the hard, gem-like flame of the emerald, Dorothea is charged by "a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam."[69] The surprising burst of sensuous pleasure at the beauty of the gemstones reveals Dorothea's relative ignorance of such experiences. Lacking an aesthetic vocabulary or frame of reference, she first tries to "justify her delight in the colors" by putting it in a religious context, recalling the use of gems as "spiritual emblems" in St. John's description of the New Jerusalem. Yet even this merging of the sensuous and the spiritual does not fully assuage Dorothea's puritanical social conscience, and she is guilt-stricken by the thought of "what miserable men find such things, and work at them, and sell them" (39). Her unsuccessful attempts to translate aesthetic response into religious and social registers only underscore Dorothea's inability to account for individual, subjective experience within her current world view. The language she uses to explain the beauty of what she sees further exposes this psychological blind spot; not "aesthetic" so much as "synaesthetic," Dorothea first observes "how deeply colors seem to penetrate one, like scent" and then resolves to "often hav[e] them by her, to feed her eye at these little fountains of pure color" (39). She articulates intense visual experience in olfactory and gustatory terms, and, in spite of her delight in the stone's "color," she never mentions the actual green hue of the emerald. In these small details, Eliot conveys Dorothea's early unfamiliarity with the aesthetic discourse of "I" and "eye." Though her reaction to the "bright gleam" shows an innate responsiveness to beauty, Dorothea's tendency to think in universals, to "turn[] all her small allowance of knowledge into principles," has turned her gaze

[69] I would argue for reading this description of Dorothea's response to the emerald as very possibly an allusion or response to that famous phrase from Pater's "Poems by William Morris," later republished as "The Conclusion" in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1st ed., 1873). Since, like his two earlier essays, "Poems by William Morris" (Oct. 1868) was published anonymously in *The Westminster Review*, it is quite likely, I think, that Eliot would have read it and, given her interest in the visual arts and the Pre-Raphaelites more specifically, would have given it some attention.

outward (to the world) and upward (to heaven), leaving her unequipped for moments requiring introspection (180). The deep discomfort that Dorothea evidences at the idea of wearing jewelry in company—for, as she says, if she did, she would "feel as if [she] had been pirouetting" (38)—is part and parcel with a more general discomfort with situations that encourage a preoccupation with self.

Dorothea's encounter with the emerald is the first of a series of aesthetic encounters, all of which serve to rouse in Dorothea an intensifying awareness of her own turbulent inner life. That this development begins with light refracting through a gemstone might seem a minor point, but it is worth mentioning that in the nineteenth-century jewelry—especially carved stones like cameos—was often considered among the plastic arts. Eliot's *Middlemarch* notebooks contain references to C.W. King's book *Antique Gems* (1866), which argues for considering the cutting and engraving of gemstones as a fitting subject for the British connoisseur, it being "one department of art in which the ancients particularly excelled."[70] More importantly, though, the image of "a bright gleam" against a dark surface—of the chiaroscuro disposition of light and shade--is picked up again and again by Eliot in the illustration of Dorothea's later attempts to make sense of her impressions. It is also an image that has a precedent in Ruskin's *Modern Painters*; in a section titled "On the Truth of Color," Ruskin designates "color" the "least important feature of nature" and says of his hero, J.M.W. Turner, that though "he paints in color . . . he thinks in light and shade, and were it necessary, rather than lose one line of his forms, or one ray of sunshine would, I apprehend, be content to paint in black and white to the end of his life."[71] The relative insignificance of color in Ruskin's estimation can be tied to his understanding

[70] Rev. C.W. King, *Antique Gems: Their Origins, Uses, and Values* (London: John Murray, 1866) iii. Wiesenfarth mentions King in his book, especially as regarding the symbolism of emeralds, their association with the healing of impaired vision.
[71] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters,* Volume II, Section II, Chapter II (Boston: Aldine Book Publishing, 190?) 276-277.

of the function of beautiful objects: color is merely decorative, adding a sensuous pleasure to the viewing experience; light and shade, though, give clarity and intelligibility to the image and (to return to an earlier point) allow the viewer to grasp the substance of the artist's affective "translation."

In what seems another application of a Ruskinian concept, the interplay of brightness and shadow becomes a dominant motif for the "current of feeling" that opens in Dorothea upon seeing light refracting through an emerald. This new emotive channel is, in fact, a mode of perception that, as with Turner, involves "think[ing] in light and shade." At the novel's beginning, Eliot stresses Dorothea's aesthetic inexperience; meeting Ladislaw for the first time, Dorothea professes herself unable to judge his sketch of the surrounding landscape, as she cannot "see the beauty of those pictures which you [her uncle] claim are so much praised." She goes on to say, "They are a language I do not understand. I suppose there is some relation between pictures and nature which I am too ignorant to feel" (90). This ignorance, though, is not constitutional but situational, which is why Dorothea's honeymoon trip to Rome is so important. Formerly deprived of a traditional aesthetic education—except, as Eliot sarcastically mentions, in "art chiefly of the hand-screen sort" (180)—Dorothea's Roman holiday doubles as an immersion course in the language of art.

Yet what makes Rome the ideal spot for the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility is also what threatens to makes such an enterprise impossible. Rome is "*the* city of visible history, where the past of the whole hemisphere seems to be moving in funereal procession with strange ancestral images and trophies gathered from afar" (179, emphasis mine). Almost buried under a superabundance of unearthed artworks and artifacts, the "Imperial and Papal city" Dorothea encounters offers an overwhelming display of objects from different eras, each the embodiment of what was valued at the moment of its creation. The close spatial proximity of what

temporally spanned centuries is what renders history "visible" in Rome, but it is a sight, Eliot suggests, that is easily borne only by two distinct types of visitors. For one of these types, Rome promises access to a narrative of Western culture, but only to the viewer already skilled enough to read it. This visitor—the aesthete—is capable of "look[ing] at Rome with the quickening power of knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shape, and traces out suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts" (179). Removed from the Roman experience by a sense of themselves as refined spectators, these individuals stand in judgment outside the historical pageant they read in the scene before them. A very different visitor is one for whom a lack of knowledge is irrelevant; in the words of the narrator, "the weight of unintelligible Rome might lie easily on [these] bright nymphs" as for them the spectacle of the past only "form[s] a background for a brilliant picnic of Anglo-foreign society" (180). Like their mythological predecessors, these mortal nymphs have no desire for historical consciousness. The Rome they experience is merely a picturesque landscape that adds a deliberate piquancy to their ordinary activities.

Though diametrically opposed, these two types of visitors—one the quintessential spectator, the other the ideal object—are both insulated from the unsettling and uncanny aspects of the Roman experience by the distanced and impersonal nature of their respective perspectives. One finds in the city confirmation of a particular philosophy of history while the other finds mere scenery for the staging of personal dramas. Both of these outlooks afford a certain degree of security against the "gigantic broken revelations" that confront a susceptible viewer who comes to Rome seeking answers to questions both personal and universal, a viewer like Dorothea:

> Dorothea had no such defence against deep impressions. Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present . . . the dimmer yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of

> white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals . . . at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. (180)

The innate receptiveness to beauty that engendered Dorothea's rapturous moment with the emerald is also what renders her defenseless against the overpowering Roman scene. As Eliot's syntax underscores, her heroine experiences Rome as of a chaotic piling-up of confusing and conflicting impressions. A vast dust-heap of historical fragments, Rome overwhelms Dorothea with its sheer abundance of things on which "to feed her eye." Moreover, unlike the "pure fountain of color" which awakens Dorothea's aesthetic sensibilities, Rome offers a beauty corrupted by context; its myriad antiquities are set against a "sordid present," a contrast that speaks not to the triumphs of civilization so much as its failures.

This contrast between the purity of the past and the sordidness of the present is part of a larger set of contrasts fundamental to Dorothea's aesthetic education. Rome's juxtaposition of "the monotonous light of an alien world" with the "deep degeneracy" of its current state gives it the chiaroscuro quality that speaks directly to Dorothea's own situation, as she is forced to recognize the difference between her own idealized vision of married life and its reality. Dorothea married Casaubon on the mistaken belief that her husband's mind would give her access to scholarly "large vistas and wide fresh air"; instead, she finds "anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowither" (181). As evidenced by his unfinished (and unfinishable) *Key to All Mythologies*, Casaubon's perspective on the world is almost entirely mediated through a hyper-critical awareness of intellectual priority. His paralyzing consciousness of earlier theories and ideas on a given subject traps him in a negative feedback loop in which his obsession with synthesizing or refuting all previous arguments guarantees that his own argument is continually and everlastingly deferred.

When asked his opinion about some frescos created by Raphael, his response—that the frescos are "highly esteemed" and that Raphael "has been held to combine . . . grace of form with sublimity of expression"—circumvents the real question, supplying instead "the opinion of the conoscenti" (183). In Casaubon, Eliot demonstrates how erudition divorced from "interest or sympathy" can become an impediment to subjective experience. His knowledge of the conventions of appreciation has made it impossible for his appreciation to be anything but conventional. For Dorothea, seeking to make sense of her impressions of Rome and of her new husband, Casaubon's dryly impersonal aesthetic (pseudo)responses only underscore a bewildering remoteness in both city and man. Still, it is in the recognition of these limitations that Dorothea develops a Turner-esque sensitivity to the shading of a particular moment. Though Dorothea is baffled by the Roman spectacle, her confusion points to a visual cognition independent of mental comprehension. Dorothea sees the objects before her with a depth and clarity that has nothing to do with their meaning. Rather, her "deep impressions" suggest an attention to the distribution of light and shadow. She sees "long vistas of white forms" with "marble eyes" that "hold the monotonous light of an alien world" and a "dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings" (180). In Dorothea's perceptions, the historicity of these objects is encoded in how the light falls on them. Bright white marble statues and dimly illuminated frescoes both convey the remoteness and foreignness of a Classical past. That this strange lighting is concentrated in the eyes of the objects—the "monotonous" and thus blinding light in the empty, iris-less eyes of statuary and the "gazing and struggling" of shadowed figures painted on walls—hints at what these artworks cannot communicate to the viewer: the quiddity of the scene on which they were created to look and of which they are the only remnants that remain to be looked at. Complicating the old chestnut

about the eyes being the window to the soul (of person or of era), the eyes of these artworks intimate a limitation in transparent media like windows; even if one can see through them, that does not mean that one is capable of understanding what one sees. Apprehended visually, the light-filled and dim gazes of sculpted and painted eyes are still radically and inalterably "alien," belonging to a moment in history that can only be understood abstractly and at a great remove.

One might argue, though, that this sense of historical distance aroused by a new aesthetic awareness of scenic chiaroscuro is what underwrites Dorothea's insight into her own situation. While she cannot yet articulate her growing marital disillusionment, her experience in the Vatican museum offers a compelling analogue that allows Eliot to translate into visual terms the distance that Dorothea recognizes between herself and her husband. Tellingly, it is when Dorothea is seen staring, seemingly uncomprehendingly, at a "streak of sunlight on the floor" next to the Cleopatra that she is described as also "inwardly seeing the light of years to come in her own home" (187). Her despair over the substance of this vision is never fully explained, because, as the narrator suggests, such an explanation would be impossible; it would be "like trying to give a history of the lights and the shadows, for the new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr. Casaubon . . . was gradually changing." Even though her husband is, for all intents and purposes, the same man that she married, Dorothea's changing perspective on the situation renders her earlier view as "alien" to her as the light in the eyes of statues, for "whatever else remained the same, the light had changed, and you cannot find the pearly dawn at noonday" (181). In these closely linked observations, Eliot draws attention to an aesthetic enigma. In the distribution of light and dark that shades a scene or object, one can read the distinctive stamp of a particular moment in history. Yet lights and shadows themselves have no history.

Once a moment is past, there is no recalling it to mind or fitting it into a narrative of progress. Thus, viewers will always be forever alienated from earlier perspectives, whether their own or others. In chiaroscuro, one has a sense of history, but history itself can only be recognized, never experienced.

For Eliot, though, the recognition of radical subjectivity is not sufficient reason for her heroine to turn her gaze inwards, to retreat behind that "thick wall of personality," and to find "success in life" through the courting of aesthetic experience, with the end goal of giving "the highest quality to [her] moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."[72] While Dorothea is initially despondent when neither Rome nor her new husband lives up to her expectation "that if she knew more about them the world would be joyfully illuminated for her," it is the limited and mystifying nature of her impressions of them that fuels her desire for a new way of understanding and relating to the world around her (183). When Eliot, in a famous, oft-quoted letter, declared Pater's *Renaissance* "quite poisonous in its false principles of criticism and false conceptions of life," she arguably is not criticizing his conception of aesthetic experience but the "conclusions" he drew from it.[73] Pater's descriptions of such moments as a series of linked, breathless pauses in the midst of rapid Heraclitean flux in fact accord quite closely to Eliot's, in *Middlemarch* and elsewhere. But, whereas for Pater—aesthetic impressions being the products of "the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prison its own dream of a world"—the individual's greatest responsibility is to "experience" itself, to capturing exquisite moments for the delectation and refinement of one's senses[74], Eliot

[72] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry,* ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1980) 186-190.
[73] George Eliot, "To John Blackwood," 5 November 1873, *The George Eliot Letters,* ed. Gordon Haight, Vol. 6 (New Haven: Yale UP 1955) 455.
[74] *The Renaissance* 187-188.

condemns such an end as solipsistic, evidencing a kind of "moral stupidity" in which one takes "the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves" (192).

Nevertheless, Dorothea's emergence from this state of moral stupidity is directly linked to her developing aesthetic sensibilities and her growing awareness of the distance between herself and the outside world. As Eliot elsewhere suggests, this distance is not only inevitable but necessary, because "if we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence" (180). Yet, if to retreat inwards is morally "poisonous" and to move beyond the boundaries of self fatal, what alternative remains? Eliot attempts an answer to this question in the same way that she has answered others throughout this Roman interlude: through the aesthetic experiences of her heroine. In a scene directly following the scene in the Vatican, Ladislaw calls upon Dorothea at her hotel, interrupting a fit of weeping over her confusion and unhappiness in her new married life. Discussing Casaubon, Will unthinkingly adds to Dorothea's despair by suggesting that her husband's work is ultimately pointless because he has refused to acquaint himself with the work of his German contemporaries who have, in Will's argument, "taken the lead in [such] historical inquiries" (191). For Dorothea, who looked to Casaubon to make herself "wise and strong in his strength and wisdom," this devastating suggestion puts everything in a new light, literally, as Casaubon just then enters the room and stands in contrast to Ladislaw:

> Mr Casaubon was less happy than usual, and this perhaps made him look all the dimmer and more faded; else, the effect might easily have been produced by the contrast of his young cousin's appearance. The first impression on seeing Will was one of sunny brightness . . . Mr Casaubon, on the contrary stood rayless. (192)

In a perspectival triangulation that inverts the scene in the Vatican museum, here Dorothea's gaze unites the three characters and creates a tableau in which the significance is again in the shading. In this instance, though, the picture presented to the viewer does not exemplify or otherwise confirm her aesthetic sense of things (as it does Naumann and Ladislaw) but rather serves to engender a compassionate awareness of other strange and dissimilar perspectives. Though up until this point Dorothea has been seeking "joyous[] illuminat[ion]," it is in the shadowed chiaroscuro created by the proximity of "sunny" Ladislaw and "rayless" Casaubon that Dorothea feels deeply for another person, not (as might be expected) for the bright and winning younger man, but for her husband. As the narrator observes, Dorothea is "perhaps not insensible" to how poorly her husband appears next to Ladislaw, but this visual contrast only serves to make "her more conscious of that new alarm on [Casaubon's] behalf which was the first stirring of a pitying tenderness fed by the realities of his lot and not by her own dreams" (192). In Will's illuminating presence, Casaubon's character is given a clarity and depth for Dorothea that has everything to do with a new-found awareness of how little she knows about her husband's situation, the exact position from which he looks out on the world. This "pitying tenderness" differs from her earlier feeling toward Casaubon because it is not motivated by any need on her own part. Seeing him in shadow, she recognizes how misguided was her expectation that in marriage she would come to truly know her husband and, through him, all those objects and experiences to which she assumed his knowledge gave him access.

Yet if the scene Dorothea witnesses between Casaubon and Ladislaw is meant to demonstrate the unattainability of true "sympathy" ("sympathy" meaning "to have a fellow feeling" or to feel "like" or "with" someone [OED],) Dorothea's response to this revelation points toward the alternative aesthetic position that Eliot carves out between radical subjectivism and an ideal of *sensus communis*. The closely-linked

aesthetic experiences that constitute the narrative of Dorothea's time in Rome culminate in the birth of a specific kind of insight, one rooted in the awareness of how all perceptual experiences are, in essence, acts of translation. For Dorothea, the overwhelming tide of sensory stimuli Rome affords lends to her impressions a materiality that makes it impossible to forget that her impressions are all refracted through the individual consciousness. The awareness of that individual perspective, though, is what makes possible her compassionate understanding of others: she recognizes the equally determined nature of their own subject positions. In her relationship with her husband in particular, the consequences are manifold; the birth of this new awareness lends to the memory of this particular day "the vividness with which we all remember epochs in our experience with some dear expectation dies, or some new motive is born" (192). Again, Eliot attributes a visual "vividness" to contrast, in this case the contrast between past expectations and present realizations. After Casaubon is thrown into relief, as it were, by the presence of Ladislaw, Dorothea recognizes that "she had been under a wild illusion" in regard to her husband, but also feels "the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own" (192).

Regardless of Will Ladislaw's later importance to Dorothea, in the scene at the hotel in Rome he remains an instrument that allows her to see her husband as an equally "sad consciousness" looking out on the world and "to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference" (193). As the final sentence in the penultimate chapter detailing Dorothea's trip to Rome, the significance of this revelation cannot be overstated, for it offers the clearest expression of Eliot's understanding of the form and function of aesthetic experience. Dorothea's

recognition of her husband's "equivalent centre of self" is the moment in which she transcends the "moral stupidity" that mars even the most erudite aesthetic impressions of Naumann, Ladislaw, and Casaubon. In something as simple as "feeling" that "lights and shadows" fall for each person "with a certain difference," Dorothea attains proficiency in a mode of emotional translation that is similar to that practiced by those fluent in "the language of Art." In her review of Ruskin, Eliot states that, although the artist cannot transcribe exactly those emotions produced by an object in nature, the aim of the artist should be to translate those emotions in the act of representation. A successful translation, though, is a highly personal act, and the result is still only an approximation of the original, an approximation in which some of the essence of the translated thing is lost and something of the consciousness of the translator is added. The translation is, in this way, in itself a chiaroscuro, the particular shading of which depends on how what is being translated is refracted through the unique perspective of the individual translating.

Through her myriad aesthetic experiences of the Roman scene, the objects it contains, and the people who populate it, Dorothea comes to what might seem a rather obvious realization: that others also burn with a hard, gem-like flame, which differently illuminates the scene for them in way that she can only guess at, never fully experience. Yet this realization is less important in itself than as it adds to her perception an ethical dimension, a sensory awareness of the limitations of her own gaze and of the never-to-be-heard "roar which lies on the other side of silence." A form of what Eliot elsewhere calls "double-consciousness," Dorothea's hard-won aesthetic perspective offers perhaps the only means of escaping a solipsistic disregard of the outside world in moments of intense perceptual experience. To see a scene and at the same time inwardly see "with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling" what lies beyond one's purview (the same scene from the position of the

Other) is to recognize the distance between viewpoints and between eras. It is to remain firmly rooted in a historical moment and yet nevertheless not lose sight of what might be called "history," the timeless space that includes all perspectives, a space that in moments in aesthetic experience is always just out of view.

Middlemarch itself can be seen as a narrative exercise in double-consciousness. As the narrator reminds its 1870s readers at the start of the Roman interlude, it is looking back on the pre-Reform England of the 1830s, a time "[w]hen George the Fourth was still reigning over the privacies of Windsor, when the Duke of Wellington was Prime Minister, and Mr Vincy was mayor of the old corporation in Middlemarch" (173). This merging of historical and fictional realities quite deliberately opens up a divide between the "now" of the reader and the "then" of the text. This divide is again marked in the scene at the Vatican museum in the previously-discussed reference to the "reclining Ariadne, then called Cleopatra" (176). Other critics have commented on the significance of this double attribution, with Abigail Rischin in particular making a compelling argument for the narrative parallels between the story of Ariadne's abandonment by Theseus and discovery by Dionysus and that of Dorothea's abandonment in the gallery by Casaubon and discovery by Ladislaw. But putting aside for the moment the matter of how the mythic figure of Ariadne or the hardly-less mythic figure of Cleopatra speaks to Dorothea's situation, I would instead focus on the narrative function of the phrase—"reclining Ariadne, then called Cleopatra"—itself. On one level, this phrasing suggests an attempt to place the statue historically, alerting the 1870s reader to its earlier (mis)identification as a representation of Cleopatra. But the reference to its dual identity also detaches it from either historical context, capturing the complex process by which previously-held beliefs are overwritten by new ones. At syntactic close-quarters (only a comma between them), the statue-as-Cleopatra and the statue-as-Ariadne makes visible to the

reader the faint outline of the past in the present, its continuing influence even when seemingly erased or overwritten.

Eliot also depicts this dynamic in *Middlemarch* when detailing for the reader just how the Roman experience lingers on in Dorothea's consciousness long after her honeymoon ends. Dorothea's impressions of Rome persist in her mind not as discrete memories but rather as fragmentary images:

> Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years. Our moods are apt to bring with them images which succeed each other like magic-lantern pictures in a doze; and in certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St. Peter's . . . and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina. (180)

Possessing her sense, fixing themselves in her memory, organizing themselves into chains of "strange associations," the images that most affected Dorothea during her time in Rome assume an agency all their own. They are not to be consciously summoned to mind but instead unconsciously assert themselves, providing material analogues to "moods" over which the individual has no control. In this way, aesthetic experiences have a kind of after-life that can be read as part of a historical narrative of subjectivity. Even if Dorothea does not see the connections between past and present, Eliot suggests, those connections can be intuited from the way in which memory calls up images from long-ago experiences to mark the continuity. Moreover, "like magic-lantern pictures in a doze"—projections of light through images on glass cast on darkened walls--these images remain in the mind as shadowy incarnations of their former selves, speaking to the passage of time even as those times are being recalled.

Reference to the "red drapery" in St. Peter's, as "like a disease of the retina" suggests in Dorothea's memory a certain ambivalence regarding these moments of

aesthetic recollection. But this description also functions like one of Dorothea's afterimages, calling to mind an earlier text of Eliot's in which the protagonist has a real "disease of the retina": her 1859 novella *The Lifted Veil.* Published first in *Blackwood's Magazine*, *The Lifted Veil* is, like *Middlemarch*, deeply concerned with the matter of perceptual experience, in this case with a supernatural element, since the narrator-protagonist Latimer has been cursed with the dubious gifts of telepathy and prevision. With a gaze trained not backwards like Dorothea but forwards, Latimer is subject to impressions of moments in the future, the clarity and vividness of which make them akin to aesthetic experiences. The most portentous of these visions occurs during Latimer's visit to the Belvedere Gallery in Prague, where, lovesick over his elder brother's disdainful fiancée Bertha, his prolonged study of a portrait of Lucrezia Borgia triggers his prevision:

> Just as I reached the gravel-walk, I felt an arm slipped within mine, and a light hand gently pressing my wrist. In the same instant a strange intoxicating numbness passed over me, like the continuance or climax of the sensation I was still feeling from the gaze of Lucrezia Borgia. The gardens, the summer sky, the consciousness of Bertha's arm being with mine, all vanished, and I seemed to be suddenly in darkness, out of which there broke a dim fire-light, and I felt myself sitting in my father's leather chair in the library at home. I knew the fireplace—the dogs for the wood-fire—the black marble chimney-piece with the white marble medallion of the dying Cleopatra in the centre. Intense and hopeless misery was pressing on my soul; the light became stronger, for Bertha was entering with a candle in her hand—Bertha, my wife—with cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress; every hateful thought within her present to me . . . It was a moment of hell . . . She came with her candle and stood over me with a bitter smile of contempt; I saw the great emerald brooch on her bosom, a studded serpent with diamond eyes . . . Gradually the hearth, the dim library, the candle-light disappeared—seemed to melt away into a background of light, the green serpent with the diamond eyes remaining a dark image on my retina.[75]

[75] George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob,* ed. Sally Shuttleworth (London: Penguin Books, 2001) 20.

Though Latimer frequently refers to his foresight as a physiological or psychological abnormality, the offspring of a "diseased consciousness," the structure of his vision closely follows Eliot's description of the process of normal aesthetic recall. A "sensation" caused by the "gaze" of a painted image calls up in his mind a magic-lantern-like image of a scene lit by firelight, a scene that does not come to him as a coherent picture but a mass of fragments. Though the picture captures a single moment, his shifting focus conveys a sense of movement that unfolds spatially rather than temporally. Latimer's description of his vision does not explicitly link its many details together, but it is the "strange poisoned sensation" evoked by the Lucrezia Borgia that creates the sinister ambience in which these fragmentary images are implicitly grouped together in a network of associations. The poisoner Lucrezia Borgia merges with the poisoned Cleopatra (who in her death throes presumably has an asp clasped to her); Cleopatra, in turn, merges with Bertha, who, in a dress ornamented with green leaves and with her emerald snake pendant, is connected to the biblical Eve whose eating of the apple curses mankind with the terrible burden of knowledge. A series of metonymic substitutions, the triptych of infamous women directly referenced and indirectly alluded to in Latimer's vision here are put in the service of narrative revelation. They point to a future that Latimer, at this point, unconsciously anticipates but, having not yet experienced it, cannot fully comprehend.

At the conclusion of *The Lifted Veil,* Latimer discovers that Bertha means to poison him, and the ominous import of his vision is brought home and the veil, as it were, lifted. Yet, in this earlier text, such a moment of revelation brings nothing but horror and, instead of engendering in Latimer a greater understanding of his wife, reduces her in his eyes to "a cunning animal whose hiding-places are surrounded by swift-advancing flame."[76] More to the point, in spite of his telepathy and prevision,

[76] *The Lifted Veil* 42.

Latimer at the end of the novella remains almost precisely where he started: his "insight" into others remains a torment to him, keeping him in a perpetual state of flight from a humanity whose petty concerns overwhelm him with a kind of visceral disgust. Latimer's "double-consciousness" thus remains in Eliot's eyes something of an impossibility. Even in a narrative where the character is thus gifted, hardwired into the gift itself is an emotional and physiological barrier to using it to gain a deeper, meaningful comprehension of others. Thomas Albrecht has argued that "the novella's failure" in this regard "is indicative of its true ethical dilemma: the inability to face the other as other, despite Eliot's injunction that we must do precisely that, and the inevitable recourse to framing the other in terms of oneself."[77] Eliot revisits this dilemma in *Middlemarch* and finds, in the arena of aesthetic experience, a means of coming to a more ethically satisfying conclusion.

Dorothea's aesthetic experiences shares with Latimer's vision in the Belvedere Gallery a number of objects. Among the more prominent of these are the emerald and the dying Cleopatra. In Eliot's later reference to the statue, her allusion to the statue's misidentification echoes her earlier text in a way that signals the progression of time between the two narratives. The statue was widely assumed to be a representation of the dying Cleopatra, until the art historian Winckelmann challenged this identification in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks, 1764, trans. by Lessing in 1870).[78] As Rischin has noted, Eliot would have become aware of the statue's previous misidentification and Winckelmann's renaming of it through her reading of Adolf Stahr's book *Torso* (1854-1855), which she reviewed in *The Leader* and elsewhere.[79] Curiously, though, in *The Lifted Veil*,

[77] Thomas Albrecht, "Sympathy and Telepathy: The Problem of Ethics in George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*," *ELH* 73 (2006): 452.
[78] Reference found in Otto Kurz's "Huius Nympha Loci: A Pseudo-Classical Inscription and a Drawing by Dürer," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 16, No. ¾ (1953): 174.
[79] See Rischin130-131, note. 8.

written four years after her review of Stahr, the statue's revised identity goes unmentioned. There is one very compelling potential explanation for this; at the beginning of the novella, Latimer introduces the matter of his prevision by stating that he has foreseen his own death, a death that will take place exactly a month from the day he sits down to write his account: "the 20th of September 1850." In 1850, the time in which the novella is set, Eliot herself and presumably an English readership would have been largely unaware of the statue's contested identity. Yet, the same would also be true of *Middlemarch*, and still, there the statue is the "Ariadne, then called Cleopatra." It is in this small difference that I read the mark of a major shift in Eliot's conception of narrative, a shift towards a more aesthetically-oriented, translative approach to the depiction of subjective experience that is closely tied to her efforts to register within the text the imprint of broader historical changes on the lives of her characters.

In another piece of writing, Eliot discusses what she calls the "exercise of a veracious imagination in historical picturing":

> How triumphant opinions spread—how institutions arose—what were the conditions of great inventions, discoveries, or theoretic conceptions—what circumstances affecting individual lots are attendant on the decay of long-established systems,--all these grand elements of history require the illumination of special imaginative treatment. But effective truth in this application of art requires freedom from the vulgar coercion of conventional plot . . . [80]

Eliot is not discussing her own writing in this fragment, nor would it even be applicable to her body of fiction as a whole, but in the Roman chapters of *Middlemarch* Eliot is experimenting with ways of escaping, even if only temporarily, "the vulgar coercion of conventional plot" in order to convey a sense of history through the depiction of multiple histories of sense. In the gallery scene, the

[80] George Eliot, *Essays and Leaves From A Notebook* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883) 288.

Ariadne/Cleopatra is seen and experienced from a variety of different subject positions, which generate discrete impressions that only can be understood in relation to one another. Each informed by past occurrences and unique and determinative combinations of theories, ideas, inclinations, and desires, the perceptions of Naumann, Ladislaw, and Dorothea come together in the space of the Vatican museum to "illuminate" the "grand elements of history" that have produced them. And in Dorothea Brooke's extended aesthetic experience in the far larger museum that is Rome, Eliot finds a compelling analogue to the problem facing the novelist committed to creating truthful fictions of history. Dorothea's acquired ability to visualize the otherness of others—not to understand it, but to recognize it, and through recognition, to see the limited nature of her own perceptions—is, for Eliot, the closest one can come to comprehending a moment in all of its very real diffuseness. It is the same diffuseness that Eliot herself strives to capture in *Middlemarch,* a "study of provincial life" that looks for freedom from convention in a kind of "historical picturing" that is achieved through a deliberate "application of art."

CHAPTER 4.

"The Painted Visages of Men of Affairs": Aesthetic Renaissance in Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*

Though he published a number of articles and short pieces of criticism early in his career, Walter Pater held off appending his name to any of his works until the printing of his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Pater's decision to publicly identify himself as an author only when he could attach his name to a work that amply demonstrated his mastery of his chosen subject matter (aesthetics and art history) and his authorial persona (gentleman aesthete) fits with what we know of a writer interested, both personally and thematically, with the impression a given gesture, word, or art object could produce. Considering the careful attention that Pater gave in his criticism to even the smallest of artistic details, one imagines that his decision to name the generically confounding, formally complicated, and substantively elusive fictional artifacts of his 1887 composition "imaginary portraits" was not made lightly. But, how are we to interpret that name? What can we infer about the form, the meaning, or the purpose of these short stories of aesthetic awakening by their author identifying them as "imaginary portraits"? For many critics, the vital clue is to be found in Pater's letter to his publisher at *Macmillan's Magazine*, in which he stresses that his first portrait "The Child in the House"

> is not, as you may perhaps fancy, the first part of a work of fiction, but is meant to be complete in itself; though the first of a series, as I hope, with some real kind of consequence in it . . . I call the M.S. a portrait, and mean readers, as they might do on seeing a portrait, to begin speculating—what came of him?[81]

[81] Walter Pater, "Letter to George Grove" April 17, 1878, letter 47 of *Letters of Walter Pater*, ed. Lawrence Evans (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 29-30. Pater's assumption that it is the natural response of the viewer to look beyond the frame of the completed creative artifact towards an equally imaginary but unrepresented beyond is revealing in itself, but nevertheless not entirely out of keeping

Preemptively refuting any "fanciful" ideas of the part of his publisher about what this work might be, Pater indirectly acknowledges certain ambiguities about its form and attempts to carve out exactly what "The Child in the House" *is* by distinguishing it from what it *is not.* First of all, it is not "the first part of a work of fiction," suggesting that it is both "complete in itself" and lacking the conclusiveness that "fiction" supposedly conveys (otherwise, why would he expect his publisher to assume it unfinished?). Second, though it is not the first part of a longer work, it is the "first of a series," which implies that Pater imagines this piece to adhere to a certain model that will productively connect with later pieces, albeit not in a conventionally organized narrative. Third, it is a work that, when seen in relation to later works of the same stamp, will hopefully have "some real kind of consequence to it." The third part of this description could be read as the author simply voicing the hope that his work will have merit and impact, but the strange insistence of the phrase "some real kind of consequence" indicates that Pater is aiming towards an effect somehow different from what is expected from "fiction," an effect that leaves some tangible mark of itself on the minds of his readers.

If not a piece of fiction per se, then what is it? Pater calls it "a portrait," but as he takes pains to point out, he does not mean for this term to suggest *ekphrasis*, a verbal representation of a visual object. He calls it a portrait because he means for the experience of reading it to be akin to the experience "seeing a portrait," for it to arouse in its audience the same sorts of emotions and thoughts evoked by the aesthetic contemplation of a painted representation of a real or fictional person. As Pater goes on to explain, the typical responses to viewing a portrait are speculations born from the question, "what came of him?" If this question seems to us, if not to Pater, rather

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with the ideas of his contemporaries. For some "the 'spiritual content' of an art object came first." For Hegel the work of art was the "realization" of an ideal concept; for Schiller, Art was held up as the preserver of what is best in humanity, an Ideal in copy from which "the original will once again be restored."

an odd one, it does gesture toward one aspect of the portrait that differentiates it from other sorts of pictures and aligns it more closely with the plastic arts. Like statues, portraits rarely provide much of a background that would allow the viewer to place the figure in a situating historical context. Thus, with the portrait, the viewer is encouraged to speculate on the circumstances that led to its composition and to attempt to read into the figure a narrative that accounts for the image being contemplated.

This formulation is of a piece with other nineteenth-century discussions of portraiture, in that the technical accomplishment of capturing a physical likeness is often considered secondary to the artist's ability to evoke the indwelling soul of the sitter, something that the viewer might detect through the study of the subject's physiognomy, posture, and expression.[82] Pater's letter quite cannily picks up on the fact that this kind of viewing experience already possesses something of a divinatory aspect and takes it one step further, shifting the hypothetical viewer's speculation from the question of a particular figure's temperament or spirit to that of the figure's history and fate. In doing so, he insinuates that the focus of his own literary portraits is not simply on the essence of the represented figure paused forever at a specific moment but also on the mystery of its origins and its end, the story of "what came of it."

Pater elsewhere challenges the idea that the portrait always is to be assumed the depiction of a specific character. In the essay "The Age of Athletic Prizeman," a sculpture of a young discus-thrower prompts him to ask,

> Was it a portrait? . . . was it the portrait of one much-admired youth, or rather the type, the rectified essence of many such, at the most pregnant, the essential moment, of the exercise of their natural powers, of what they really were? . . . was it in that case a commemorative or votive statue . . . ? . . . was it, again, designed to be part only of some larger decorative scheme . . . or a work of

[82] That being said, this comment of Pater's does diverge from arguments that he made elsewhere, particularly in *The Renaissance,* where he argues that the painting's melding of form and subject should suspend these sorts of questions.

> *genre* as we say, a thing intended merely to interest, to gratify the taste with no further purpose?[83]

In light of his insistence upon the "real" subject of portraiture, his series of questions here throws into doubt what Pater meant by calling his fictive character sketches "imaginary portraits." What does come across clearly is that for Pater the portrait has a myriad of potentially contradictory associations and functions. It can be a plastic art as well as a visual art; it can depict a particular figure or a universal type; it can memorialize something past or look longingly towards something not yet come into being; it can be something to admire in and of itself or it can exist as a single ornament in a richly-decorated scene. Considering all of these alternatives, it would seem that part of the attraction of the portrait form for Pater is its essential ambiguity, the way in which the featured image is capable not only of depicting a character but also of suggesting a milieu, a context that the portrait hearkens back to and in which it once had a designated place. To say, then, that the portrait should inspire in the viewer a curiosity concerning "what came of" the subject might signify more than an interest in what the represented figure might have made of himself. "What came of him?" might also mean "what came *out of* or *from* him?" or "what effect did the represented subject have on the outside world?"

However, to evaluate the characters of the *Imaginary Portraits* on the basis of what they achieved is something of an exercise in futility, since the narratives almost uniformly illustrate subjects who are not creators or shapers of history in any conventional sense. Pater's subjects produce nothing substantial, neither children nor finished works of art, nothing to grant them a form of immortality. Still, as Pater points out, their legacies are actually of a more wide-reaching, if less concrete, variety, largely owing to this failure. It is through inspiration, the influence of their example

[83] Walter Pater, *The Works of Walter Pater*, vol. 7 *Greek Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1901) 289-290.

that something "comes of" these characters. Unlike the other more recognizably historical portraits found elsewhere in Pater's writing, the imaginary portraits offer narratives of aesthetic education, the education of figures whose refined and visionary consciousnesses mirror the confluence of social and cultural forces associated with periods of cultural renaissance. Hence, the moments of aesthetic encounter in the *Imaginary Portraits* can be read as both allegories of and participants in a process of aesthetic awakening. The important reservation here, however, is that for Pater this awakening cannot be represented as the effect of an individual's heroic efforts. Rather, the encounters that Pater stages—of subjects and their milieus—are dramatizations of events too diffuse to narrate in any simple way. Through a broader discussion of Pater's "imaginary portraits" in relation to certain earlier critical works and a more intensive study of the quasi-biographical portrait "The Child in the House," this chapter tries to illustrate the ways in which this complex narration of a culture's aesthetic education—as it is focalized through the personal experiences and broader influence of a doomed and beautiful individual—unfolds.

The Historical and Intellectual Context of the *Imaginary Portraits*

As regards the *Imaginary Portraits*, William Shuter has argued that "these fictions may be described as compositions in which the central figure forms an integral part of the landscape from which he can neither be isolated nor dislodged."[84] Shuter's observation rightly stresses an aspect of Pater's portraits that is often overlooked: they focus on their characters' interactions with specific places. It is too often the tendency to understand Pater's fiction as—in the words of Percy Lubbock—the epitome of a type in which "the art of drama is renounced as thoroughly as it has ever occurred to a novelist to dispense with it."[85] Yet, to label these narratives as static, as purely

[84] William Shuter, *Rereading Walter Pater* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 18.
[85] Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: Penguin, 1957) 195.

ekphrastic elaborations, is to ignore the dialectical character of Pater's narrative structure. This structure is characterized by the interplay of subject and background—which often includes minor characters witnessing the central character's aesthetic experiences from a distance—which furthers the development of his characters while gesturing towards changes in the historical periods in which those characters find themselves.[86] This interplay gives Pater's fictive tableaus a theatrical aspect in that moments of aesthetic encounter always concern both the act of seeing and the act of being seen.

A passage in "Duke Carl of Rosenmold" observes that "[p]eople had in Carl, could they have understood it, the spectacle under those superficial braveries, of a really heroic mind at a disadvantage."[87] The spectacle to which Pater here refers is not Duke Carl himself but rather his mental striving towards an ideal, in this case, an aspiration to reclaim the arts and culture of an earlier period. Throughout "Duke Carl," the title character is referred to as "the northern Apollo," the idea being that he is bringing to benighted Germany the light of culture, largely through the enthusiasm with which he seeks out and strives to appreciate neglected art forms. In the realm of music, for example, he acts as a patron for "the deputy organist of the grand-ducal chapel," and gives the young man the idea for "a project of some musical and dramatic development" based on the story of the Greek god of the arts. When the organist composes the piece, he finds inspiration not in myth, but in Duke Carl himself: "the near, the real and the familiar, gave precision to, or actually superseded, the distant and the ideal . . . [t]he soul of the music was but a transfusion from the fantastic but so interesting creature close at hand" (91). Carl later performs the role the organist writes

[86] To use Michael Fried's terminology, it would not be incorrect to say that in Pater's portraits, the *composition*—the part of narrative painting concerned with character and action—is to be read through the *ordonnance*—the part concerned with the physical arrangement of figures on the surface of the canvas.

[87] Walter Pater, *Imaginary Portraits* (New York: Allworth Press, 1997) 89. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

with him in mind, and, he is "true to his proposed part in that he gladdened others by an intellectual radiance which had ceased to mean warmth or animation for himself." Making the reader a viewer of the "heroic mind at a disadvantage," or, more concretely, a man performing the role of Apollo for an audience that he is teaching to appreciate his performance, Pater dramatizes the subject's aesthetic coming-of-age and, in the process, offers up as an object of contemplation not the viewing subject but visual experience more generally. These visual experiences most often are translated through the narrative framing of the subjects' engagements with particular spaces, particular objects that evoke or recall strong sensations.

By making "spectacles" of his characters' aesthetic encounters with their respective environs, Pater attempts to give form to what is typically understood to be intangible and ephemeral, solely in the realm of the experiential. Their "sensations" externalized, it is the subjects in their roles as viewers that become the things worth contemplating. In "Sebastian von Storck," when the title character attempts to think through the Spinozist "ideal of intellectual disinterestedness," his ruminations "showed him, as he fixed the mental eye with more and more of self-absorption on the facts of his intellectual existence, a picture or vision of the universe as actually the product, so far as he knew it, of his own lonely thinking power—of himself, there, thinking" (76). That even this celebration of abstract thought—the world of ideas cut off from the world of sensation—is here rendered by Sebastian as a concretized image of himself thinking illustrates Pater's commitment to the idea that great acts of thought (philosophic or aesthetic) only lead the thinker more deeply into the mysteries of the self. There is no escaping the frame of the individual consciousness in the portraits; its parameters are always shifting to accommodate various modes of engagement with the world.

That being said, if the protagonists of Pater's imaginary portraits never quite manage to escape "the narrow chamber of the individual mind," one could argue that they make for themselves excellent companions. Like the Shaftesburian soliloquy, Pater's narratives are all concerned with "the business of self-dissection," with the moment when the subject "becomes two distinct persons," the actor and the audience.[88] Though the degree of self-consciousness attributable to the central figures varies, it is nevertheless the case that all of the portraits include incidences of confrontation in which the subjects act as spectators to their own lives. This deeply uncanny moment of self-division and self-recognition is rendered in the first imaginary portrait, "The Child in the House," when the protagonist Florian Deleal, awakening from a dream of his childhood home, falls "to thinking of himself therein" and of how "[i]n that half-spiritualised house he could watch the better, over again, the gradual expansion of the soul which had come to be" (4). The idea is that "the story of [his] spirit" is something that Florian might watch and, moreover, must watch set against a proper backdrop. Thus, autoscopy (self-examination)—one of the two activities that, as Derrida notes, are contrasted by Plato in the *Phaedrus* with "the hermeneutic adventure of myths"—becomes a drama that the Paterian subject simultaneously stages, performs, and views en route to autognosis (self-knowledge).[89] The author, though, persistently complicates this process by the introduction of an audience that witnesses the autoscopical endeavors of the protagonist with an interest verging dangerously on scopophilia. The erotic charge that this audience receives from viewing these figures transforms not just their sensibilities but their perspectives. As in "Denys l'Auxerrois," the young man's "influence" creates a sense of community, a feeling of intimacy between the townspeople founded on a shared

[88] Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury (Earl of), *Characteristics of Men. Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. John M. Robinson, vol. 1 (London: Grant Richards, 1900): 72.
[89] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination, Norton Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Philip Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001) 1834.

enthusiasm for new ideas that his presence evokes. The narrator deems him responsible for "turning the grave, slow movement of politic heads into a wild social license, which for a while made life like a stage-play" (53). The town falling under the spell of his influence, "one man engaged with another in talk in the market-place; a new influence came forth at the contact . . . at last a new spirit was abroad everywhere."

In this psychological play, spaces that evoke personal and communal memories and, more generally, a sense of the past often serve as the basis (and the base) for the aestheticization of certain types of sensory experience. Gerard Genette has argued that "the reason for aesthetic feelings lies in the phenomena of affinity," and what Pater's narrative portraiture strives to illustrate time and time again is that "sensation" is actually grounded in some correspondence between the inner world of the subject and the reality that he inhabits, a correspondence all the more powerful because it becomes inscribed on the subject's consciousness, "inward and outward being woven through and through each other into one inextricable texture" (4). Thus, when Pater states in his unfinished essay "The Aesthetic Life" that the "entire scene of human action experience" is like "a portrait to interpret, to get behind," one cannot help but note that the spot in which he literally places the observer—"behind" the picture—is, positionally at least, that of the portrait's subject, looking outward from behind the frame.[90] Even if one only gets behind the portrait to then, as Pater says, "return to the face of it . . . with finer and fuller sense of the particular visible fact," it is still the case that observation of the world depends on viewing oneself within the frame, either as part of the composition or as something beneath it.

[90] Quotation taken from James Eli Adams's *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 199. Adams, in reading this passage, cannily notes that "the observer's vigilant distancing and aestheticizing of experience is enforced […] by the paradigm of the portrait." My own reading is certainly indebted to this observation.

Given the concreteness here of Pater's formulation, his noted insistence elsewhere on the fictiveness of his fiction, on these narratives being "Imaginary—and portraits," suggests a more fundamental difference between them and the "historical portraits" of *The Renaissance* than is typically acknowledged.[91] Certainly, as others have argued, the appellation that Pater gave to his short fiction owes something to both his desire to avoid strictly autobiographical interpretations and to his awareness of literary precedents such as Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*. However, Pater was playing off the dialectical opposition between the terms—if we understand "imaginary" in the strictest sense as that which exists only in the imagination and the portrait as the very real representation of a particular likeness, then the "imaginary portrait" offers a very specific synthesis: the bodying forth of an ideal personality, the creation of a material form and a historical context (a portrait) for what is immaterial and atemporal (the imaginary). Pater's imaginary portraits, in their preoccupation with figures like those that he calls in "Diaphaneitè" "evanescent shades" evincing "that colourless, unclassified purity of life" (205), tell a very different story from the historical portraits. As Pater says in that early essay, there is a particular narrative that is attached to the diaphanous character: "[p]oetry and poetical history have dreamed of a crisis, where it must needs be that some human victim be sent down into the grave. These are they whom in its profound emotion humanity might choose to send" (208-209). This passage outlines a process not dissimilar to the narrative arc of many of the imaginary portraits, and the portraits' often-violent ends herald a gathering of energies and forces that catalyze such crises. Pater's theorization of crisis here resonates with what Robin Gilmour has called the "philosophical triad," which includes "Hegel's thesis-antithesis-synthesis . . . Saint-Simon's notion of 'organic' and 'critical' phases leading to a 'Golden Age' . . . and . . . Comte['s] . . . more influential system of the

[91] Quotation taken from Gerald Monsman's "Pater's Aesthetic Hero," *University of Toronto Quarterly* (Winter 1971) 144.

Theological, Metaphysical, and Positive (Scientific) stages of human history."[92] That being said, for all of Pater's interest in a Hegelian conception of history, his representation of the process by which these moments of transition occur is never denaturalized or philosophically abstract. On the contrary, his fascination with the physical violence that precedes and catalyses cultural upheaval manifests itself in the often painful and bloody ends met by his protagonists as they are sacrificed to the forces that their presences helped bring into being.

That Pater understood the revolutionary implications of the 'diaphanous type' is evidenced by his otherwise puzzling inclusion of a reference to and discussion of a passage from Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution* in "Diaphaneitè." The passage in question imagines Charlotte Corday, the murderer of Marat, at the particular moment she had resolved upon her course of action: "'What,' [Pater quotes] says Carlyle, of Charlotte Corday, 'if she had emerged from her secluded stillness, suddenly like a star; cruel-lovely, with half-angelic, half-demonic splendor; to gleam for a moment, and in a moment be extinguished; to be held in memory, so bright complete was she, through the long centuries" (209). On one hand, this quotation seems an indirect reference to Saint-Simon, for whom the French Revolution was the exemplar of the crisis prior to a period of resolution and peace. But this excerpt from Carlyle's "poetic history" also prefigures the focus of Pater's short fiction, which is not with the crisis itself but with the build-up to it. Rather tellingly, the part of Carlyle's representation of Charlotte Corday in *The French Revolution* that seems most illustrative of Pater's own narrative preoccupations is not included in "Diaphaneitè" but instead is the sentence that follows right after, in which Carlyle goes on to envision a personified History: "History will look fixedly at this one fair Apparition of a Charlotte Corday; will note whither Charlotte moves, how the little Life burns forth so radiant, then vanishes

[92] Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890* (London: Longman Group, 1993) 32.

swallowed of the Night."[93] The framing perspective of History here collapses the infamous story of Charlotte Corday into a portrait, a single aestheticized image in which her still figure is imagined to be animated by the coming convergence of her character with those circumstances that will cause it to flame up and then extinguish itself, her "little Life" immolated on the pyre of revolution. Carlyle in this way foregrounds Charlotte Corday's tragic end before he tells her story, infusing his narrative with a sort of gloomy fatalism that engenders a certain amount of speculative interest regarding how it all comes about and what then "comes of it."

Still, Carlyle's description of Charlotte Corday foregrounds a problem with representation with which Pater's portraits are also preoccupied. Considering that she has "vanished, swallowed of the Night," how is "History" expected to have the amount of light sufficient to "look" at her? The answer is through Carlyle himself and others whose narrative representations of her are capable of drawing attention not to the facts for which she is remembered (as the intended murderer of Marat) but to her intentions, which are themselves aestheticized in *The French Revolution* through the verbal portrait of Corday poised on the cusp of action and which are offered up for the contemplation of the sympathetic viewer. The tragedy of Charlotte Corday is that the sacrifice of her own life to a cause fails in its intent; her reason for the murder ("I killed one man to save a hundred thousand; a villain to save innocents; a savage wild-beast to give repose to my country . . . I never wanted energy") is not borne out by history.[94] It is nevertheless the case that her character, perhaps because of her failure, partially fulfills Pater's vision. In Carlyle's representation of her, she is put before the reader as "bright complete," a description that seems to presage Pater's later description of the diaphanous character as possessing a nature like "that fine edge of

[93] Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Thompson & Thomas, [n.d.]) 314.
[94] Carlyle 317.

light, where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point" (205). That she also, within the boundaries of Carlyle's narrative, stands as a symbol of the values of the French Revolution, values that were forgotten in The Terror that followed her death, offers another correlation to "Diaphaneitè," in that she—like Pater's "diaphanous type"—is also put before the reader as "a kind of prophecy of this repose and simplicity . . . showing that it is indeed within the limits of man's destiny" (206).[95] Even though, by historical standards, Charlotte Corday is a failure, in Carlyle's framing, she continues to exist as a character that both aesthetically satisfies and offers potential provocation to subsequent generations of readers who might view her as a model worthy of emulation.

That being said, it is unlikely that Charlotte Corday herself would have been seen by Pater as the ideal incarnation of the character type "Diaphaneitè" attempts to outline. Rather, Corday embodies Pater's diaphanous type only in Carlyle's depiction of her at a pivotal moment, a wholly imagined moment that is pre-historical in the sense that it is prior to the action that will ensure her place in the history of the French Revolution. Carlyle's "Charlotte Corday" anticipates Pater's portraiture in this regard, as the imaginary portraits also all strive to give a face, an individual form to a particular society's reinvigoration, its temporary coming-into-consciousness at the prompting of outside influences, the cultural equivalent of what he will call in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* "the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways" (R 187). Pater's narrative illustrations of characters that experience most intensely and convey to others this spirit of renewal capture the revolutionary potential of these convergences. Yet, at the same time, the volatility and inherent instability of this atmosphere is always being underscored

[95] Evidence for this reading of Corday's significance to Carlyle is also to be found in the placement of the chapter "Charlotte Corday," which is actually the first chapter of Book XVII, "Terror."

through the repeated insistence on the sacrifice of these figures to the cultural energies that they have helped to rouse, accidentally or intentionally.

Gerald Monsman has described Pater's imaginary portraiture as "an attempt to isolate a cultural phase by portraying the contribution which the hero, the representative of his age, makes as he breaks through the veil of mortality into the immortal world of light."[96] Though Monsman quite vividly renders the general trajectory of these narratives, his focus on the mythic structures underlying the fiction both simplifies the role of the central figure (for is he necessarily a hero?) and overlooks the violence implicit in his "breaking through." To be sure, Monsman in this way takes a page from Pater himself, as the latter often elides or metaphorizes moments of destruction and bloodshed in his fiction. But if Pater can be said to aestheticize acts of violence, it must also be acknowledged that he frequently describes acts of aesthetic perception in terms of physical pain and suffering, in the process drawing attention to the dynamics of domination and submission implicit in the "longing for some undivined, entire possession" of the beautiful object and the way in which that longing in an especially receptive individual amounts to "a kind of tyranny of the senses" (11). The interconnectedness of pain and perception in Pater's fiction is part of what Regenia Gagnier has called his "notorious materialism," an almost morbid preoccupation with the phenomenal basis of aesthetic experience, an appreciation of beauty intensified by a constant awareness of mortality.[97]

In "The Child in the House," the protagonist describes the expansion of his mental faculties as the concomitant "growth of an almost diseased sensibility to the spectacle of suffering, and, parallel with this, the rapid growth of a certain capacity of fascination by bright color and choice form" (8). Both lines of development are

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[96] Gerald Monsman, *Pater's Portraits* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1967) 39.
[97] Regenia Gagnier, "A Critique of Practical Aesthetics," *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994) 269.

understood in terms of spectatorship: suffering is a "spectacle" which evokes certain sensations and beautiful objects are appreciated for their ability to "fascinate." In the case of aesthetic development, the world is a stage on which all aesthetes act as viewers. Yet Pater's idea of the viewer denies the connotations of distance and detachment usually attached to that role; his viewers are figures who are always being powerfully acted upon. In the case of "bright color and choice form," it is a question of opening oneself up and increasing one's capacity for fascination. Responsiveness to the spectacle of suffering, though, is frequently described as something that certain "diseased sensibilit[ies]" cannot keep out, a protective move on Pater's part that attempts (perhaps a bit too vigorously) to defend his viewers against the charge of cultivating a taste for the pain of others.

I would argue that it is precisely the preoccupation with the suffering of beauty and the beauty of suffering that galvanizes Pater's fiction. These narratives explore the possibilities for aesthetic engagement through the staging of visual experience as a kind of secular passion play, in which is dramatized the suffering and death of both the central figure and the particular mode of perceptual apprehension that he embodies. If, as Carolyn Williams has argued, "in Pater's work the achieved figure of the 'person' may be described as the formal composite (retrospective and totalized) of . . . 'transitive moments' of attachment to culture," then, how do the imaginary portraits endeavor to frame these "transitive moments" in their depictions of extraordinarily receptive personalities who embody the qualities of a superior vision capable of reforming the world?[98] Also, why do the imaginary portraits so often stop short of representing this reformation, either breaking off before the subject ventures into the public realm or indicating that a later period of renaissance is something that the central figure influenced only indirectly, through the manner of his life and death? In

[98] Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 283.

many ways, the ultimate failure of the Paterian subject to bring about the renewal that his entrance heralded is tied to what Peter Allan Dale has called "the Epicurean or aesthetic relativism" that underwrites these texts: the idea that, as Pater so famously put in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance,* "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end."[99] As in his criticism, Pater's fiction offers up aesthetic experience as not simply an end in itself but as the only kind of experience that has (as it were) an ending. Though individual time rushes on in an endless flow of sensory data, and historical time presents itself as a dialectical progression, aesthetic experience temporarily arrests and gives form to a particular moment, framing a specific consciousness in the act of recognizing in an object in the world a "sensible vehicle or occasion" that is "the necessary concomitant of any perception of things." In the imaginary portraits, Pater structures through narrative the dynamic interplay of these myriad affinities, establishing correlatives between subject and object, the personal and the universal, the sensuous and the ideal. In these narrative efforts, he frequently presents pain as a necessary conduit through which this recognition is achieved, pain (of self and others) frequently serving to make the individual aware of how, in spite of the "thick wall of personality" that shields them from various forms of contact with the world, they are nevertheless connected to it on a primal physical level, the world being "so ingeniously constructed to play pain-fugues on the delicate nerve-work of [all] living creatures" (10). The awareness of this shared vulnerability is what adds the "painful" element to moments of aesthetic appreciation in Pater's works, allowing these moments to also be productive of sympathy and understanding.

All of these fictions are, in essence, dreams of space, which speak towards the yearning for a sense that aesthetic perception is not simply confined to an individual

[99] Peter Allan Dale, *The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History: Carlyle, Arnold, Pater* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977) 182. Dale here differentiates between "positivistic relativism" of Mill (for ex.), which is the exploration of experience as "a means to abstract knowledge and the advancement from society," from Pater's "aesthetic relativism," in which experience is simply an end in itself.

subjectivity but also perhaps has a visible, even a communal aspect. The first two portraits that Pater wrote—"The Child in the House" (1878) and the unfinished and posthumously published "An English Poet"—represent the development of the aesthetic temperament by creating genealogies that link up certain powerful sensations with the objects that first elicited them. These etiological narratives work to frame their subjects' engagements with the spaces that first gave meaning to perceptual experience, formative encounters that provide the basis of all subsequent impressions and sensations. In the case of other imaginary portraits, "A Prince of Court Painters," "Denys l'Auxerrois," "Sebastian van Storck" and "Duke Carl of Rosenmold,"[100] the quasi-historical landscapes that Pater depicts are imaginary places in which the unifying vision of the central character inscribes itself on a world and its inhabitants, transforming it into a scene or a picture that is aesthetically coherent. Pater's fantasy of a perceptible *sensus communis*—a community formed around a collective mode of apprehension—highlights the depth of the desire for an organizing, ideational structure to give concrete form to a transitory, subjective phenomenon.

But much as the imaginary portraits give expression to that wish, they also evidence an underlying skepticism regarding the possibilities for its realization. The fragility of these dreams of aesthetic unity—fragility that is registered formally in "The Child in the House," which is structured as an actual dream narrative—is an issue to which these stories continually return in their representation of the coherence of the moment coming undone and of the character who brought it about necessarily being swept away (at different points, both figuratively and literally) with the tide of forces that had been temporarily arrested. The question remains, though, whether the insistence on the breakdown and ultimate failure of this process is a necessary component of Pater's conception of aesthetic experience, particularly his tendency to

[100] All four of these narratives were written between 1885 and 1887 and were published, along with "Child in the House," as the *Imaginary Portraits* in 1887.

explain acts of painful (and often futile) exertion as motivated by a hungering after some kind of unattainable emotional satisfaction. In the appreciation of beauty Pater locates a suffering and longing for the lost source of perceptual experience, the "agony of home-sickness" that he attributes to his protagonist in "The Child in the House" (17). Similarly, images of suffering and death are imbued with a beauty that is tied to the way in which they gesture towards the past and moments irrevocably lost to time, like the dismembered body of Denys l'Auxerrois, whose "tortured figure" is described as containing for the narrator "the trace of the Middle Ages . . . like old marks in the stone in rainy weather" (IP 62). The Paterian aesthetic sensibility is a haunted one, and, in the imaginary portraits, this sense of loss or belatedness shows itself as an obsession with (re)capturing the "trace" or essence of a particular milieu through the narrative elaboration of a representative personality.

In the same way, though, that a painted portrait draws the viewer's attention to the physical absence of the portrait's subject (the immortality of the person's image contrasted with the mortality of the actual person), Pater's narrative portraits, through their craftedness, their careful staging of encounters that best highlight the matrix of causes and effects that go into the formation of a cultural moment, reify their distance from the immediacy of the very situations they are meant to recreate. In their depictions of cultures enacting transition and personalities performing perception, the imaginary portraits narrativize the psychic drive that undergirds the never fully satisfying pursuit of aesthetic gratification. The questing subjectivities at the center of these portraits—who themselves are frustratingly elusive figures for viewers in and readers of these narratives—dynamically represent the essentially human search for what Pater has ambiguously called "something in the world, that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all," that is, a feeling of emotional, intellectual, and sensory fulfillment is fleetingly apprehended in moments of aesthetic experience (43).

With this in mind, it is possible to read the imaginary portraits as narratives that initially promise but ultimately withhold from the reader the depiction of such an aesthetic satisfaction, deferring resolution while gesturing beyond the frames of the individual narratives towards some ideal state of being that is always implicit but never fully realized. What Pater does represent is the social aspect of aesthetic perception, its root in and its influence on the cultural milieu to which the subject belongs. Further, his insistent staging of the individual subject's visual and visible engagement with certain kinds of communal forms and spaces (e.g., polite society, the Parisian social scene, the monastic community of Auxerrois and the church, etc.) gives a supposedly private act a distinctively social cast, requiring the presence of an audience. Yet these fictions also display a certain amount of anxiety concerning the possibility of actually representing through the narrative painting of these aesthetic personalities something approximating the subjective aesthetic experience.

My argument will deal directly with this anxiety by focusing on Pater's conflicted relationship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and on the way in which the imaginary portraits evidence Coleridge's influence on the prototypical form of the sensitive, melancholy young men whose coming-into-consciousness these narratives depict. Pater's radical reframing of the Coleridgean concepts of a benevolent, animate Nature and of the poet-as-aesthetic-instrument ("the Aeolian Harp") in his imaginary portraits, particularly "The Child in the House" and "An English Poet," also offers a suggestive way of analyzing the complex relation between subject and background and between exterior and interior landscapes. In these narratives, the depictions of their title characters make certain types of experience "something to look at." Creating historical frames and narrative forms for aesthetic perception, Pater works to capture and embody the indwelling content of a sensuously apprehended moment, rendering it much like a work of art. It is the often tragic "spectacle" of visual

experience in the imaginary portraits with which this chapter is primarily concerned, the spectacle as something that is always both more and less real than the phenomenon it attempts to portray.

Pater, Poetry, and the Romantic Prototype

In his essay on the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Pater shows his tendency to think of the artistic productions of a single mind as objects in relation to one another, to be arranged not temporally (in terms of chronology) but spatially (in terms of topography):

> The dwelling-place in which one finds oneself by chance or destiny, yet can partly fashion for oneself; never properly one's own at all, if it be changed too lightly; in which every object has its associations—the dim mirrors, the portraits, the lamps, the books, the hair-tresses of the dead and visionary magic crystals in secret drawers, the names and words scratched on the windows, windows open upon prospects the saddest or the sweetest; the house one must quit, yet taking perhaps, how much of its quietly active light and colour along with us!—grown now to be a kind of raiment to one's body, as the body, according to Swedenborg, is but the raiment of the soul—under that image the whole of Rossetti's work might count as a House of Life, of which he is but the "Interpreter." And it is a "haunted" house.[101]

The figure of the house is central to the Paterian imaginative landscape, serving (as Perry Meisel so eloquently puts it) as "a cipher for a notion of cultural achievement . . . of the discipline required of genius on both the level of individual achievement and the level of civilization."[102] Yet as Pater's narrative sketch of Rossetti's work seems to suggest, all of these marks of progress are built and are balanced rather precariously on the foundations of the past, rendering each creative act a partial return to origins, a regression that is as stimulating as it is uncanny. The objects that decorate this idealized "dwelling-place" are significantly all things that

[101] Walter Pater, *The Works of Walter Pater*, vol. 5 *Appreciations* (New York: Macmillan, 1901) 214.
[102] Perry Meisel, *Absent Father*: *Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980) 123.

facilitate moments of doubling and doubling-back. In addition to more straightforward memorial tokens—the portraits, the locks of hair frequently used in mourning jewelry, signatures that in time read like epitaphs—there are tools of reflection and refraction, the mirrors, lamps, and crystals. And there are also those portals that open literally and figuratively into other cherished and familiar scenes—the windows and books that frame "prospects the saddest or the sweetest." All of these things come together in this description to create an atmosphere that is both melancholy and fantastical, if only because of the suggestion of the mystical or the occult attached to the idea of secret "visionary magic crystals" and unknown words scratched on glass.

This infusing of the domestic with an element of the magical or miraculous is connected to the purpose of this passage, which is to capture the essence of the process by which external spaces are incorporated into the consciousness of the artist. This process is depicted as akin to an instance of metempsychosis, but instead of the soul of the scene simply changing forms, Pater portrays this transformation as the atmosphere of the dwelling-place becoming a kind of "raiment" that clings to the physical body of the viewer, making it something potentially visible to others. While thus impressing itself onto the living figure of the artist, this formative "image" also gives shape to his creative faculties. It is, as Pater argues, the dwelling-place in which "one finds oneself by chance or destiny," which means both that one cannot deliberately search out this charmed space but also that it is here that one "finds oneself," becomes conscious of oneself in the act of viewing. This moment of self-recognition is bound up in understanding how one's perspective is determined by the "associations" which certain scenes and objects evoke, but as Pater stresses, these associations are always the unconscious product of what came before, of previous experiences that one did not consciously register at the time as integral to one's intellectual and aesthetical

development. For this reason, to revisit the sites of one's profoundest encounters with the outside world is to feel oneself "haunted" by the ghosts of earlier sensations that one can only imperfectly recall.

The image of the house here echoes that of Rossetti's sonnet-sequence "The House of Life." Pater's interest in this series of poems arguably is owing to more than the aptness of its title within the context of his own review of Rossetti. Like Pater, Rossetti is also invested in the idea of tracing and recording a sequence of significant moments, in this case, moments that pertain to the formation and dissolution of romantic love. In the prefatory sonnet with which Rossetti introduces "The House of Life," he calls the sonnet form "a moment's monument,— / Memorial from the Soul's eternity / To one dead deathless hour" (1-3), a description that also encapsulates the structure of the Paterian imaginary portrait, another literary edifice devoted to the enshrinement of past experiences, albeit intensely personal ones.[103] Rossetti's "House of Life," like John Bunyan's "House of the Interpreter," offers a model for the kind of narrative that the portraits come to exemplify: stories largely lacking in actual plot but consisting of a number of tableaus rich in symbolic import. All of Rossetti's works (Pater does not here distinguish between his poetry and his paintings) thus are presented as verbal and visual interpretations of the image of that internalized, ideal dwelling-place, each offering a glimpse into that room from its own unique angle. [104]

Pater's remarks on Rossetti gesture towards his own creative preoccupation with perceptible forms of aesthetic experience, or the narration of moments in which

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[103] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The House of Life: A Sonnet Sequence*, introductory sonnet (Portland, ME: Thomas B. Mosher, 1908) xiii.

[104] John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the seventeenth-century Christian allegory widely read well into the nineteenth-century, lies behind Rossetti's and Pater's elaborations of the figure of the house. That Pater at one point deems Rossetti just an "Interpreter" of his own "House of Life" implies that, for him, the web of personal experiences that determine the artist's "light and colour"—his particular creative vantage point—is something that the artist in his many productions does not directly convey, but rather only translates. Gerald Monsman has noted the importance of Bunyan in Pater's writings, although he focuses not on the "House of the Interpreter" passage but the later "House Beautiful" section and its relation to the quest-epic form that he sees as contributing to the imaginary portraits.

the consciousness of the aesthete is manifested in its relation to those actual spaces and objects that gave it shape. The dwelling-place of Pater's description is a metaphor for this consciousness, a space crowded with things that in turn are meant to signify pivotal instances of aesthetic engagement. In providing a concrete image that collapses a temporal continuum into a spatial format, Pater evidences a commitment to the idea that, though lost in reality, aesthetic experiences leave their mark on the mind, creating an internalized topography of sorts that can be read like a map of the individual's most vital moments. Breaking down this map into its component parts is, as Pater notes elsewhere, a means of honing and proving one's own aesthetic faculties. For instance, Pater likens the reading of Wordworth's poetry to a kind of aesthetic training, creating an ability—cultivated through hard work—of separating gold from dross, the "golden pieces" representing what is "organic, animated, expressive" in the poem and the dross what is "conventional, derivative, inexpressive."[105] Pater sees those who have "followed this difficult way" as having "passed through some initiation, a *disciplina arcani*," a form of discipline the result of which is access to secret or arcane knowledge.[106] This evaluation of Wordsworth offers a subtle but important revision of John Stuart Mill's famous description of Wordsworth's poetry as "medicine" for the mind, offering moral instruction through the representation of (as Mill puts it) "states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty."[107] Pater, like Mill, locates in Wordsworth's poetry the edifying example of a "contemplative" nature, but it is an aesthetic, rather than ethical,

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[105] *Appreciations* 43.

[106] The literal translation is "the discipline of the secret," and refers to a term "used since the 17th *c.* for the withholding of certain parts of Christian teaching and worship from pagans and from catechumens till the last stages of their preparation," "Discipline Arcani," *Christian Cyclopedia,* ed. Erwin Leuker (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 10 May 2009 <http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/display.asp?t1=d&word=DISCIPLINAARCANI> The term was previously used by Newman in his *Apologia*, but as Pater applies it here, it seems divorced from its Christian context.

[107] John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1887) 148.

edification. To read Rossetti and Wordsworth—in Pater's formulation—is to learn how to distinguish the parts of a particular work that are commonplace and imitative from those that are expressive of an original and distinctive vision, to distinguish dross from gold.

Pater's view that the works of the imagination are "organic, animated, expressive" owes a great deal to Coleridge's concept of the imagination, particularly as it is elaborated in "The Aeolian Harp," which envisions the poet's connectedness to an aesthetic universe. Although not expressly stated, the distinction between imitation and creation is a slightly tweaked version of the Coleridgean distinction between fancy and imagination. For Coleridge, "fancy," a lower order of the mental processes, arranges and reorders sensory data while "imagination," part of a higher order, is responsible for the creation of organically-unified forms derived from the same body of information. For Pater, though, while he agrees with the ranked division of the two, the real point of differentiation between fancy and imagination has less to do with the final product—the work of art—than it does with what this final product tells us about the mind that created it. Pater opens his essay on Wordsworth by restating the substance of Coleridge's argument, but then goes on to lobby for his own particular emphasis:

> Some English critics at the beginning of the present century had a great deal to say concerning a distinction, of much importance, as they thought, in the true estimate of poetry, between the *Fancy*, and another more powerful faculty—the *Imagination.* This metaphysical distinction, borrowed originally from the writings of German philosophers, and perhaps not always clearly apprehended by those who talked of it, involved a far deeper and more vital distinction, with which indeed all true criticism more or less directly has to do, the distinction, namely, between higher and lower degrees of intensity in the poet's perception of his subject, and in his concentration of himself upon his work.[108]

[108] *Appreciations* 39.

At once aligning his own ideas with the philosophical tradition of German Idealism and distancing himself from the individual perhaps most responsible for transmitting its central tenets to an English audience—Samuel Taylor Coleridge—Pater uses the distinction between fancy and imagination to establish his own critical position. He acknowledges the role that this "metaphysical distinction" plays in "the true estimate of poetry," but claims a superior level of critical acumen for those who recognize the "deeper and more vital distinction" underlying it. This more fundamental distinction (fundamental in the sense that it is something with which "all true criticism more or less directly has to do") is one not of kind but of degree; poetry is to be judged according to the amount of intensity in "the poet's perception of his subject" and to "his concentration of himself upon his work." Similarly, critical works are to be evaluated based on the degree of "apprehension" the critic evidences and just how much his criticism "has to do" with distinguishing between the higher and lower forms of poetic intensity. The intimation here is that poetical and critical excellence rest on the same foundations. In both cases, it is the clarity and strength of perception and one's receptiveness to the subject matter that determines the quality of the work. Significantly, Pater's standard of literary excellence has nothing to do with any particular moral or social code of conduct. It is instead a question of fidelity to one's vision of the world and understanding of the self. In this way, Pater might be seen as attempting to recuperate the Romantic insistence on the primacy, the quasi-religious significance of perceptual experience from the didactic interests that it had been made to serve by Victorian sages like Mill, Carlyle, and Ruskin. But his revision of Coleridge's distinction also works to destabilize the binary opposition between different genres and modes of representation. In much the same way that the "Winckelmann" chapter in *The Renaissance* blurs the lines between poetry and prose by defining "poetry" as "all literary production which attains the power of giving

pleasure by its form, as distinct from its matter," Pater here undermines the division between creative work and critical analysis with the claim that both depend primarily on the acuity of the author.[109] The imagination is thus no longer solely the province of the creative artist: it is a mental faculty that is used by both the artist and the critic, as long as they are superior viewers, capable of viewing intensely and self-consciously.

Pater's reconceptualization of the imagination / fancy dichotomy shows Pater's resistance to interpretative systems that ascribe value on the basis of anything other than the text's formal evidencing of a superior aesthetic sensibility. In its attempt to revise the grounds upon which a work is judged as the product of fancy or imagination, this passage also opens up two conceptual questions significant to the topic of my discussion: how do we characterize Pater's understanding of the word "imaginary" and in what way, exactly, does that understanding impact how we, in turn, make sense of his imaginary portraits? "Organic, animated, expressive" is how Pater describes those parts of Wordsworth's poetry that show the engagement of the imagination, but as his modification of Coleridge's "metaphysical distinction" seems to suggest, it is also a matter of how a work gives structure to its creator's unique personality and perspective, concretizing it into picture or narrative that testifies to the exalted nature of its own origins. For a text to be "imaginary," then, is for it to form an image that is "organic" in, "animated" by, and "expressive" of the organizing consciousness of its author. Whether it is a deliberate reply to Coleridge or merely an evocation of a broader cultural understanding of imagination, Pater's description of imaginative activity echoes the famous question that Coleridge puts to his "pensive Sara" in "The Aeolian Harp":

> And what if all of *animated* nature
> Be but *organic* Harps diversely fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps

[109] *The Renaissance* 184.

> Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (44-48, emphasis mine)[110]

Expressing a yearning for a pantheistic explanation of the universe, Coleridge considers in these lines the possibility that God is not transcendent but immanent. Rather than standing outside the world, God is seen as in and of the world, making all things in nature manifestations of this divine presence, each a part of an organically-unified whole. Though there is little in Pater's oeuvre that suggests neo-pantheism, his sympathy for pantheism as a system of thought and a creative stimulus is evident even in his first published article, "Coleridge's Writings" (1866), in which he argues that what makes Coleridge's theory of the imagination distinctive is the "Schellingistic" (Pater's word) pantheist worldview that underwrites it.[111]

After describing Coleridge's understanding of the imagination as "a vigorous act of association, which by simplifying and restraining their natural expression to an artificial order, refines and perfects the types of human passion," Pater goes on to elaborate on how Coleridge's theory shows "that faint glamour of the philosophy of nature which was ever influencing his thoughts":

> [That philosophy] suggested the idea of a subtly winding parallel, a 'rapport' in every detail between the human mind and the world without it, laws of nature being so many transformed ideas. Conversely, the ideas of the human mind would be only transformed laws. Genius would be in a literal sense an exquisitely purged sympathy with nature. Those associative conceptions of the imagination, those unforeseen types of passion, would come, not so much of the artifice and invention of the understanding, as from self-surrender to the suggestions of nature; they would be evolved by the stir of nature itself

[110] Elisabeth Schneider, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poetry and Prose* (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1971) 15.

[111] "Coleridge's Writings" was published anonymously in the January 1866 edition of the *Westminster Review*. Pater later substantially revised this essay, combining it with parts of a biographical sketch on Coleridge that he contributed to T.H. Ward's anthology *The English Poets* and another article he wrote titled "Coleridge as a Theologian." The result was published as a chapter in the 1889 volume *Appreciations*.

> realizing the highest reach of its latent intelligence; they would have a kind of antecedent necessity to rise at some time to the surface of the human mind.[112]

The appeal of Coleridge's speculation—as Pater describes it here—is in the way in which it locates the source of all imaginative activity not in the mind but in the continuing dialogue between the human mind and an intelligence latent in nature. It is a relational or associative worldview; every human idea is the expression of some natural law and every natural law confirms the truth of some human idea. The mark of genius, then, is the degree to which the "artificial" forms of an artist's creations showcase the correlation between a particular "type[] of human passion" and the aspect of nature that suggested it. Yet, when Pater speaks of "the suggestions of nature," he does not mean simply that Coleridge believes that a natural object inspires a certain emotional state; it is also that the very existence of the natural object calls for and necessitates a fuller realization in the mind of the individual of what the object itself only imperfectly suggests. In Coleridge's formulation, nature itself awakens in the individual a sympathetic awareness of the correspondences between interior and exterior states of being. Most importantly, the greater one's receptivity to this awareness, the more one comes to embody the "highest reach" of nature, exhibiting an exquisitely refined sensibility to the natural foundation of all imaginative activity.

What makes the pantheistic underpinning of Coleridge's theory of the imagination so intriguing to Pater is arguably that it offers a means of escaping (if only in theory) the solipsistic confinement of imaginative activity to the individual consciousness. In Coleridge's philosophy of nature, God's existence—manifested in the natural world—is visibly present and thus capable of being recognized and deciphered by viewers who are themselves "organic harps diversely fram'd," animated and united by the same divine presence that infuses all perceptible objects in nature.

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[112] Walter Pater, "Coleridge's Writings" (1866), *English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century)*, ed. Edmund D. Jones (London: Oxford UP, 1916) 441-42.

Offering an unbroken line of connection and continuity between the perceived and the perceiver, Coleridge's poetic pantheism transforms the consciousness of the receptive observer into an instrument ("organic" in the etymological sense of the *organon*—"organ of the body" or "tool"). The imaginative productions of this observer are also transformed when considered from the perspective of this theory. No longer wholly subjective impressions or monologic utterances, works of art become testaments to their creators' engagements with nature. As epitomized by Coleridge's "conversation poem" form, art objects in a pantheistic framework read like dialogues with silent interlocutors, recreations of a moment of correspondence between the elevated sensibility of the viewer and the suggestive atmosphere of his surroundings.

Elsewhere in "Coleridge's Writings" Pater expresses his wariness of pantheism as an abstract philosophical concept, a wariness echoed whenever confronting any system of thought that would restrict the free play of the individual's impressions or that might harness those impressions in the service of some narrow epistemology. However, in spite of his stated ambivalence towards theories that would attempt to explain man's relation to nature in terms of a set of fixed laws, Pater evidences a certain attraction to pantheism in its most primitive form: as an "unfixed poetical prepossession," found first in the culture of ancient Greece (and later in "a certain class of minds" epitomized by a young Coleridge, prior to his embracing of a more orthodox Christianity) and marked by "the conception of nature as living, thinking, almost speaking to the mind of man."[113] In this incarnation, pantheism is not a religious belief or philosophical doctrine so much as it is an attitude, a poetic notion that colors the individual's experience of the natural world. Moments of aesthetic appreciation of nature suggest an almost mystical communication between the viewer and the landscape he surveys. The individual is thus not simply appreciating nature

[113] "Coleridge's Writings" 438.

but is forced to recognize in a particular scene or object its quintessence, the animating and organizing spirit of it that corresponds closely with his own.

To sense that nature is animated by a pervasive but disembodied world-soul is not all that different from sensing in a work of art or literature the animating consciousness of its creator or in a culture the animating force of a *zeitgeist*, which partially explains Pater's sympathy for more poetical professions of pantheistic belief. In the *Imaginary Portraits,* Pater himself attempts to capture the distinctive essences of particular periods in history and of the personalities that are their least-corrupted products. But, in "Coleridge's Writings," pantheism also speaks to the desire to explain the way in which aesthetic experiences seem to depend on a feeling of correspondence (whether actual or imagined) between the individual mind and the outside world and to outline the mental process by which these formative encounters come to give structure to the consciousness of that individual. This desire finds fuller (and less conflicted) expression in Pater's first imaginary portrait, "The Child in the House," in which the protagonist, Florian Deleal, much like Coleridge's unnamed speaker in "Kubla Khan," falls asleep and dreams of a symbolically-freighted landscape inhabited by a dream-surrogate (in Pater's case, the child-self of Florian). In Coleridge's so-called poetic "fragment," the speaker's dream is said to have resulted from an "anodyne," which caused him to lose consciousness in the midst of reading a passage in "Purchas's Pilgrimage" detailing the palace and grounds of the Mongol emperor Kubla Khan. Similarly, Florian's dream is also preceded by an encounter with a story-telling traveler (albeit an actual as opposed to a textual encounter): "As Florian Deleal walked, one hot afternoon, he overtook by the wayside a poor aged man . . . and as the man told his story, it chanced that he named a place, a little place in the neighborhood of a great city, where Florian had passed his earliest years" (3). That both are inspired by tales of pilgrimage suggestively associates the

subsequent delineations of dreamscapes with the exotic and far-flung locales typically found in quest-narratives.

Yet while Coleridge dreams of the mystical summer-palace in Xanadu, Florian dreams of his birthplace, making Pater's narrative as much a story of return as one of venturing-forth. Also, whereas "Kubla Khan" is typically Romantic in its description of a fantastical space in which the awe-inspiring forces of Nature act as an analogue for those of the Imagination (an expression of his early belief in—as M.H. Abrams has described it—"the Neoplatonic concept of the *natura naturans*, a dynamic principle which operates not only behind the particulars of the external world, but also in the mind of man"[114]), "The Child in the House" presents the reader with a landscape that seems animate and organically-unified precisely because it is seen through the eyes of Florian's younger incarnation. In "The Child in the House," the imagination is no longer another manifestation of the same divine essence that is in evidence in the natural world. Instead, the young Florian's imagination, his "childish fancy," is a vehicle through which Pater is able to represent feelings of connection with the outside world approximate to the kind inspired by a belief in an animated universe. Florian's formative experiences in and around his childhood are organized in Pater's text into a narrative of aesthetic development. Charting the process whereby the individual comes into consciousness of himself as an aesthetic subject, this quiet story of an isolated boy in a country house invites comparison to the quest-epic form in that the "mental journey" of the narrative's young protagonist is meant to be understood as a specific (and extraordinary) example of a universal "process of brain-building by which we are, each one of us, what we are" (4). For the young Florian, this process of brain-building takes the form of a series of progressively sophisticated aesthetic encounters, in which early experiences with beauty start the development of his

[114] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971) 131.

sensibilities and then those increasingly refined faculties, in turn, make him capable of expanding his scope of observation and of thinking critically about what he has observed.

Although "The Child in the House" is the most autobiographical of his imaginary portraits, Pater takes pains distinguish the narrative form he is creating/ employing from that of the character sketch or memoir (fictional or otherwise). Florian's dream is not a straightforward, nostalgic reminiscence of his old home; rather, it is "a dream which did for him the office of the finer sort of memory, bringing its object to mind with great clearness, yet, as sometimes happens in dreams, raised a little above itself, and above ordinary retrospect" (3). Pater, distinguishing between the "finer sort of memory" and "ordinary retrospect," employs here a spatial figuration common to his oeuvre: that of artistic "relief." Carolyn Williams, in her incisive discussion of Paterian tropes, defines "relief" (as Pater understands it) as "an art form that expresses the relation between levels of focus and distance as foreground to background, or figure to ground."[115] Like bas relief or a cameo, the "object" of Florian's reverie—his first home—is not the thing itself but the thing raised above itself, elevated above "ordinary retrospect" in a way that transforms it into something worthy of artistic contemplation. The outward appearance of the house is not altered in his dream; it is the same building, "only with tints more musically blent on wall and floor, and some finer light and shadow running in and out along its curves and angles, and with all its little carvings daintier" (3). Seen in the light of the adult Florian's unconscious, aestheticizing perspective, the various parts of the building are unified and put in relation to one another in such a way that they form a coherent image, much like in a visual composition.[116]

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[115] *Transfigured World* 69.

[116] It is probably worth nothing here that in Pater's writing generally, the so-called "light" on an object is often meant to signify the unifying gaze of a particular perspective.

The central object in this mental picture, to which all other things serve as backdrop, is the younger incarnation of Florian, the prototypical aesthete-in-training whose developing sensibilities are the focus of the narrative. That the dynamics of "relief" also affect how he is to be viewed is evident from the first mention of the child's appearance in the dream: "In the house and garden of his dream he [the older Florian] saw a child moving, and could divide the main streams, at least, of the winds that had played on him, and study so the first stage in that mental journey" (4). Florian sees a child in his dream house and gardens but fails to recognize that that child is his earlier self, and highlighting the difference and distance between them is the older Florian's deliberately objective (and objectifying) stance. In a utilization of the typically gendered codes of viewership, Florian is presented as the active subject who, from a removed vantage point, is capable of elucidating from the tableau put before him the relation between (to use Williams' terms) "figure and ground," his child-self and those things that might have an effect upon him. In contrast, the child is described as a passive object, something to be acted upon by his surroundings and evaluated by the critical eye of his future self. Moreover, in what seems an intentional echoing of "The Aeolian Harp," the child is likened to a musical instrument, animated by "the main streams . . . of the winds that had played on him."

Pater, thus distinguishing the younger from the older Florian through this veiled system of aesthetic binaries, also reinforces the boundaries of the narrative frame that work to separate the dreamer from the product of his dream. Florian, as an adult, views his own childhood much as the reader does; both Florian and the reader are viewers surveying the development of the child, watching "in that half-spiritualized house . . . the gradual expansion of the soul which had come to be, there" (4). While it is nevertheless a picture of his own early experience that he is observing, Florian's distanced and critical attitude towards the dream-tableau makes it difficult to

see it as a sentimental self-portrait. For one thing, Pater does not provide any real information regarding the adult Florian, meaning that there is no way of comparing him to the personality outlined in his dream. Also, the persistent rhetorical "othering" of the child continually gestures towards the idea that there is something essential and unique about the young Florian, particularly in his association with "that half-spiritualized house." To say that the child's soul "had come to be, there"—a phrase whose awkward comma placement insists upon the connection between "being" and "being there"—as opposed to simply "had come to be" is to link the emergent personality of the child to a particular place at a particular moment in time. It is also to suggest that there is something especially important to be gleaned from observing not simply the child himself, but the child against the backdrop of his first home.

The dream figures as a re-imagining of the originary and tangible source of all of the adult Florian's aesthetic feelings and impressions, the point to which he might "trac[e] back the threads of his complex spiritual habit" (5). If we take "habit" here to mean both a customary activity and the vestments typically worn to signify one's profession (a metaphorical reading further justified by Pater's reference to the "threads" of this "habit"), Pater intimates that the description of the child's "portrait" will serve as a narrative unraveling of Florian's "texture [] of mind," the patterns of thought and preferences that make him what he is (presumably, an aesthete). As other critics have noted, for Pater, superior perceptual abilities often have a perceptible quality.[117] In other words, figures possessed of unusually sensitive aesthetic faculties themselves are described in Pater's work as having a discernible aura that renders them objects worthy of contemplation and adulation by and for other (potential) subjects of aesthetic experience. It is precisely this aura of aesthetic superiority that he

[117] James Eli Adams talks at length about just this thing in *Dandies and Desert Saints*. Particularly of note is his discussion of the visibility of masculine "reserve" in *Marius the Epicurean*, where he argues that, in the expression of "reserve," "the spectator has become the performer, whose authority resides in a capacity at once to show and to control one's feelings" (198).

will trace in the later portraits. In "The Child in the House," however, Pater is interested in providing through narrative a concrete basis or ground for legitimate aesthetic preferences, impressions, and judgments. The topography of the adult Florian's consciousness is mapped out for the reader through the story of the child's formative experiences in his home and garden. The defining characteristics of Florian's aesthetic sensibilities are "trace[d] home" to various pivotal moments in the child's life, serving to link up the "customary" sentiments that characterize the adult aesthete's perspective to the material object or objects that first called these feelings into being.

The individual's emotional tenor and his encounters with a series of tangible vehicles are the two terms around which the narrative movement from innocence to experience revolves. Yet without the Romantic belief in a sentient universe to bind all things together "in God," the network of correspondences between the mind of the child and the outside world outlined in Pater's text lacks the philosophical validation of a "Great Chain of Being." In the Darwinian light of the late-nineteenth century, it is by chance, not destiny, that one comes by the experiences that shape one's character. Even if the individual is uniquely well-suited (even genetically hard-wired, Pater seems at times to intimate) for the rigors of aesthetic appreciation, the fruitful intersection of personality and place is always only an arbitrary occurrence: "half, tint and trace and accident of homely colour and form, from the wood and the bricks; half, mere soul-stuff, floated thither from who knows how far" (4). In the same vein, Pater also dispenses with the notion that the aesthetic faculties can be honed only through early exposure to established examples of natural or man-made beauty, arguing that "it is false to suppose a child's sense of beauty is dependent on any choiceness, or special fineness, in the objects which present themselves to it" (5).[118] Rather, it is the ability

[118] Of course, it is debatable how far one should take this assertion. Certainly Pater's own work as an art-critic depends upon the idea of an artistic "canon," and the influence of Hegel can be seen in his

of an object to evoke "a difference for the sense" that renders it "aesthetic." In the case of the child, even the air pollution from distant factories (which adds a range of colors to the sky) has its appeal "in the lack of better ministries" (5).

One of the "better ministries" that Pater (again, through his employment of distinctive terminology) might be referencing here is once more to be found in the early poetry of Coleridge, in this instance, "the secret ministry of frost" that is the source of the speaker's ecstatic vision of his own child's aesthetic awakening in the poem "Frost at Midnight." Pater's ministry of smog—one of the many "things without thus ministering" to the child throughout "The Child in the House"—is distinct from the "ministry of frost" in "Frost at Midnight" in that the two authors understand ministration differently. In Coleridge's poem, the speaker espouses the idea that it is better for a child to be brought up in nature because

> [. . .] so shalt thou see and hear
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all, and all things in himself. (58-62)[119]

For Coleridge, the development of the aesthetic faculties is directly tied to the pursuit of divine knowledge. To attain fluency in the symbolic meanings of objects in nature is to become a hierophant capable of interpreting "the eternal language," the hidden order of the universe. Gerard Genette would see in Coleridge's poetic vision another example of what he calls "a psychological phenomenon" constitutive of many systems of aesthetics: the "tendency toward objectivization," that is, the tendency to read into one's own subjective impressions of an aesthetic object a confirmation of its inherent properties or value. In contradistinction to this position, Genette argues, is that of

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frequent prioritization of works of art over objects in nature. What I take this assertion to mean is that, contrary to the idea put forth in many "how-to" manuals of aesthetic appreciation popular in the period, there is no standard education that might be said to prepare one for the role of an aesthete.

[119] *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poetry and Prose* 94.

"aesthetic relativism," which "consists solely in taking note of an empiric, a posteriori, unsystematic datum (the plurality of appreciation) and in recognizing its cause (the subjective or relative nature of these appreciations)."[120] Judged by this standard, Pater is much more of an aesthetic relativist. In "The Child in the House," Pater evokes the idea of an aesthetic ministry mainly to suggest the way in which various things become linked by their shared significance in the mind of the individual. Objects have value to the degree that they command the attention and appreciation of the child and are later incorporated into his "house-room" of memory, "giving form and feature . . . to early experiences of feeling and thought" and creating certain "susceptibilities" which come to define the adult's relation to the world (6). Similarly, his first house—the source of so many of these experiences—"becomes a sort of material shrine or sanctuary of sentiment," an external correlative to the interior space of consciousness, as weighted with symbolic meaning as the "Nature" of Coleridge's poem.

Though his relativist position—by locating meaning not in the object but in the subject—effectively evacuates from the material world the atmosphere of divinity that is perceptually present to Coleridge, Pater's language throughout this portrait (and, one might add, throughout the other portraits) retains a decidedly sacral cast. The house is likened to a "shrine" and a "sanctuary," and the life of the child "who lived on there quietly" is described as ascetic, almost monkish, in its seemingly perpetual state of contemplative solitude. Of course, these religious forms of expression are being utilized in a secular context, which raises the ever-contentious question of whether Pater's use of Christian tropes actually evidences anything beyond a meaningless love of the ceremonial. I instead would argue that, for Pater, there is no such thing as an empty ritual. All of his protagonists are characterized as possessing an inherent solemnity or *gravitas*—what, in "The Prince of Court Painters," is referred

[120] *The Aesthetic Relation* 68, 119.

to as "an air of seemly thought . . . *le bel sérieux*" (25)—that invests their actions with a kind of deliberation that verges on the ceremonial. What is more, in "The Child in the House," aesthetic experience is itself typically figured, in different ways, as a rite, a personal transformative event that is also a public (re)enactment of the dual "recognitions of the visible, tangible, audible loveliness of things, as a very real and somewhat tyrannous element in them—and of the sorrow of the world, of grown people and children and animals, as a thing not to be put by in them" (8). In calling Florian's first home "the material shrine or sanctuary of sentiment," Pater is indicating its significance, not simply as the site of the child's initial aesthetic experience but as the ground for all of his later aesthetic experiences. It represents "a system of visible symbolism," that, when anatomized over the course of the narrative, showcases the ways in which a particular "sentiment"—the individual's feeling or attitude towards something—is always a hearkening back to the first time (and first place) that this sentiment was elicited.

The symbolic network of sentiment embodied in the image of the house offers the relativistic "modern spirit" the closest thing possible to a sense of universality—of a continuous, permanent and comprehensible connection with things outside the self—in a world now deaf to the "sounds intelligible" of the "eternal language." This feeling of continuity is fostered by perceived similarities between seemingly dissimilar aesthetic experiences, similarities that ring like echoes in the mind of the child, producing the same emotional response. Organizing his narrative of development around such echoes, Pater thus makes visible the process of "brain-building" that goes along with the experience of recurrent "sentiments of beauty and pain." These "two streams of impressions" serve to shape the child's consciousness, arousing in him what is rather ambiguously described as "a more than customary sensuousness: the '*lust of the eye*,' as the Preacher says, which might lead him, one day, how far!" (8,

emphasis mine). The intrusive voice of "the Preacher" in this passage evidences Pater's awareness of how his focus on the "sensuousness" of aesthetic experience might be interpreted by a public audience already suspicious of any worldview that prioritizes the pleasures of the body over the salvation of the soul. In the figure of the Preacher, Pater ventriloquizes the alarmist position previously adopted by those who found in the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* a host of ideas corrupting to susceptible youths and for whom the cultivation of exquisite experiences was seen as dangerously decadent, the first step on the road to ruin.[121] Yet, there is also another "Preacher" who Pater positions himself against here: the lionized Slade Professor of Fine Arts, John Ruskin. In an early work, *The Elements of Drawing*, Ruskin advocates the importance of regaining what he famously calls "*the innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify;—as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight."[122] Jonathan Crary posits that by "innocence of the eye," Ruskin means "a vantage point uncluttered by the weight of historical codes and conventions of seeing," a mode of perception that seeks "to avoid the repetitiveness of the formulaic and conventional."[123] Though ably illuminating one aspect of Ruskin's proposal, Crary's explanation overlooks the thing that one imagines Pater most would have objected to: that Ruskin's ideal viewer comes to the aesthetic object with no previous perceptual experience, lacking the capacity to make distinctions, to compare or prefer. The "innocent eye" demands a prelapsarian purity of vision, informed by neither knowledge nor desire.

For Pater, though, there is no especial virtue to be found in such a model of aesthetic experience. A gaze uncorrupted by a "consciousness" of what things

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[121] Just an aside: the words of the Preacher are from the KJB, John 2:16: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world."
[122] John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1888) 22.
[123] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 96.

"signify" is little better than a *tabula rasa*, a blank surface on which the images that continuously flash across it leave no trace or mark. To see with this innocent eye—as Pater suggests in the "Conclusion—is to be forever caught in Heraclitean flux (a never-ending stream of "impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent"[124]), incapable of deriving from or investing in the moment anything permanent. It is also to be curiously resistant to the affective power of aesthetic objects, their inherent emotional and/ or erotic appeal. The receptivity of the protagonist in Pater's portrait to these forms of appeal is what makes his perception—though he is a child—anything but "childish." Possessing a "lustful" eye rather than an innocent one, the child's sensibility is defined (and, in a sense, predetermined) by the "more than customary sensuousness" of his responses to certain natural and artistic tableaus, specifically those that strongly represent and evoke "sentiments of beauty and pain" (8). Pater's conception of aesthetic experience is structured by the relation between what I earlier called the suffering of beauty and the beauty of suffering: beautiful objects tyrannize the senses while representations of physical suffering can seem beautiful.

In "The Child in the House," Pater describes the twin experiences of beauty and pain as fundamental to the child's mental development. "Those elementary apprehensions of the tenderness and of the colour in things" (as Pater calls them in one passage) are linked in the mind of the child by their shared ability to temporarily arrest the unconscious flow of impressions in a moment of intense sensation (9). The sensuous component of these moments imparts to them their particular clarity. The strong association between the apprehended object and the feeling that it inspired gives these experiences a kind of *presence* that inscribes them indelibly in the child's consciousness with all the vividness and detail of visual compositions. At the same time, the narrativizing of these formative encounters focuses not simply on the child's

[124] *The Renaissance* 187.

engagement with a particular object or scene but also on its aftermath or, perhaps one should say, its afterlife, the way in which it the moment extends beyond itself by shaping the adult Florian's aesthetic sensibilities. One incident that amply illustrates this dynamic is the child's discovery of a blooming hawthorn tree, an experience which the narrator describes as inadvertent, yet definitive:

> I have remarked how, in the process of our brain-building, as the house of thought in which we live gets itself together . . . little accidents have their consequence; and thus it happened that, as he walked one evening a garden gate, usually closed, stood open; and lo! Within, a great red hawthorn, in full flower . . . a plumage of tender crimson fire out of the heart of the dry wood. The perfume of the tree had now and again reached him, in the currents of the wind, over the wall, and he had wondered what might be behind it, and was now allowed to fill his arms with flowers . . . the beauty of the thing struck home to him feverishly, and in dreams, all night, he loitered along a magic roadway of crimson flowers, which seemed to open ruddily in thick fresh masses around his feet . . . Always afterwards . . . the blossom of the red hawthorn still seemed to him absolutely the reddest of all things; and the goodly crimson, still alive in the works of old Venetian masters, or old Flemish tapestries, called out always from afar, the recollection of the flame in those perishing little petals, as it pulsed gradually out of them, kept long in the drawers of an old cabinet. Also, then, for the first time, he seemed to experience a passionateness in his relation to fair outward objects, which disturbed him, and from which he half-longed to be free. A touch of regret or desire mingled all night with the remembered presence of the red flowers, and their perfume in the darkness about him; and the longing for some undivined, entire possession of them was the beginning of a revelation to him, growing ever clearer . . . (11)

Earlier in "The Child in the House," Pater compares the way aesthetic impressions penetrate the "sealed" and "enclosed" soul of the child to the way sensory data from "the larger world without" penetrates a similarly closed-off house "as at windows left ajar unknowingly, or over high garden walls" (8). In this later passage, the figuring of aesthetic experience as a moment of infiltration, in which an impression of a sensible object in the real world passes into the enclosed space of the viewer's consciousness, finds its literal equivalent in the child's accidental intrusion into the secret garden

containing the hawthorn tree. As the commentary of the first-person narrator suggests, the child's passage through the gate is a transformational moment, one consequential to the development of his "house of thought." For one thing, the image of the red hawthorn tree—it is intimated—is the originary source of at least one of the adult Florian's aesthetic preferences: his taste for Italian paintings and Flemish tapestries which possess a particular shade of "goodly crimson" reminiscent of the hawthorn blossom, "absolutely the reddest of all things." Also to be traced back to the child's impression of the hawthorn tree is the "revelation" of his "passionateness," his propensity for intense attachments to "fair outward objects."

Significantly, though, it is through the descriptive rendering of the tree that the extremity of the child's reaction to it is registered. The narrative is not in the child's voice, but nevertheless, it is through his eyes, his imagination, that the scene is presented to the reader. In the elaboration of the child's vision (both what he sees in the moment and what he later dreams and recollects), the hawthorn tree functions as a symbolic index of the complicated, often contradictory sensations and feelings provoked by the encounter. Thus, the guise in which it first appears to the child—as a "plumage of tender crimson fire out of the heart of the dry wood"—is suggestive of the outpouring of emotion he experiences while viewing it. Similarly, the burgeoning awareness of his "passionateness" is manifested in the form of his dream, in which he walks along a roadway composed of blooming hawthorn flowers. Even the disturbing undercurrent of erotic violence—the child's longing for "some undivined, entire possession" of the hawthorn coupled with his own half-articulated desire to free himself from its oppressive influence—is captured in the arrestingly graphic description of the broken tree branch as a severed limb, life pulsing out of its "perishing little petals." Condensing a flood of sensory details into a linked series of images, Pater narratively reconstructs the process by which material objects are

impressed upon and incorporated into the mind of the viewer, becoming a kind of symbolic shorthand for subjective sensations of which the individual is only partially conscious. The hawthorn tree—the first object to evoke desire—becomes, to the child, the objective embodiment of that emotion.

Pater's rendering of the aftermath of the child's adventure indicates that it is not the moment of encounter with the aesthetic object which determines an individual's preference but rather the awareness of the moment's passing. With the child, it is notable that even his gathering of the hawthorn blossoms does not satiate the need for the "entire possession" that his passion requires. Indeed, almost as soon as the initial moment of ecstatic contemplation (in which the hawthorn's existence, before only indirectly sensed through its elusive perfume, is manifestly present) is finished, the child is described as dominated by a feeling of "inexplicable excitement" over which he has no control. "The remembered presence of the red flowers" is now mixed with "a touch of regret *or* desire," the choice of conjunction suggesting that, when considered in relation to the immediate sensuous gratification of the aesthetic encounter, there is no real distinguishing between regret (which focuses on something in the past) and desire (which casts forward into the future); both are emotions whose object is not in the present, in the realm of the directly perceivable. Whether the child feels desire or regret, what is significant is that he is now no longer able to uncomplicatedly exist in the moment. The "revelation" of his own nature has changed his perspective, making him (self)conscious of a heretofore unacknowledged longing for a certain kind of experience.

The experience with the Hawthorn tree is definitive to the child's development insofar as it foregrounds the connection between bodily sensation and aesthetic perception. Throughout "The Child in the House," formative aesthetic moments mostly occur *in extremis*, at a moment in which the child senses what Pater calls "this

pressure upon him of the sensible world," a feeling of pain or pleasure that underscores the corporeality of his own being and of the perceptible world. Like the speaker in the "Aeolian Harp," the child is described as "yield[ing] himself to these things, to be played upon them like a musical instrument" (12). That being said, Nature is nowhere near the gentle handmaiden to experience in Pater's narrative that she is in Coleridge's poem. Although the natural world plays a role in the expansion of the child's aesthetic faculties, it is an arbitrary, somewhat violent one, as in an instance in which the child is bitten by a wasp:

> —and coming in one afternoon in September, along the red gravel walk, to look for a basket of yellow crabapples left in the cool, old parlour, he remembered it the more, and how the colors struck upon him, because a wasp on one bitten apple stung him, and he felt the passion of sudden, severe pain. For this too brought its curious reflexions; and, in relief from it, he would wonder over it—how it had then been with him—puzzled at the depth of the charm or spell over him, which lay . . . in the mere absence of pain. (12)

Again, here, Pater's narrativization of the incident (re)enacts the progression of events by which a series of impressions are unified in the mind of the viewer, transformed into a coherent aesthetic image. By noting first the salient visual details—the red gravel and the yellow apples—the scene is already evoked when it is noted that these colors "struck upon him" (in much the same way that the beauty of the hawthorn "struck home") "*because* . . . he felt the passion of sudden, severe pain" [emphasis mine]. The sting of the wasp, Pater suggests, is what gives the child's impression of the room a hyper-real clarity, a vividness that is registered bodily by the sensation of passionate-pain. Though any "ministering" by nature in this instance is inadvertent, an accidental confluence of circumstances, the feeling of pain nevertheless serves to punctuate the moment and set it apart from ordinary experience, making the scene in which it occurred—in a way—something to look at. Elaine Scarry has argued that physical pain is "exceptional in the whole fabric of psychic, somatic, and perceptual

states for being the only one that has no object . . . pain is "not 'of' or 'for' anything—it is itself alone."[125] Pater's representation of the child in pain bears out this assertion to the extent that it is the irreducible, incomparable experience of pain that makes it a moment resistant to analysis and assimilation. Because the child cannot recall the feeling of physical suffering in its absence, his memory of that afternoon is preserved as an aestheticized scene, a tableau that is as beautiful as it is unfamiliar when viewed from the "charmed" perspective of a subject relieved of the pressing awareness of intense bodily sensation.

When the child, in the aftermath of the wasp incident, ponders the "depth of the charm or spell over him, which lay . . . in the mere absence of pain," the description of pain's absence as a "spell" suggests that, for Pater, the more abnormal state-of-being is not that of intense sensation but rather the lack of it. That there is something dangerously anesthetizing about everyday routines and habits is an idea to which Pater returns to throughout his career. In the imaginary portraits, though, he drives this point home by underscoring the revelatory potential of moments in which the viewing subject breaks through the "wall of custom," in the process making visible to himself (and the reader) the myriad ways in which he is connected to the world, part of a causal network of relations in which he both acts and is acted upon. The child's discovery of this invisible network develops over the course of "The Child in the House," but is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than when he is given the gift of a starling, only to realize that his desire for a pet resulted in the separation of a mother from her children. Although eventually letting the bird go, the child nevertheless feels a sense of remorse tied to the insight that "he too was become an accomplice in moving, to the limit of his small power, the springs and handles of that great machine in things, constructed so ingeniously to play pain-fugues on the delicate nerve-work of

[125] *The Body in Pain* 162.

living creatures" (10). In "Winckelmann," Pater argues that the function of "modern art" is to represent the "tragic situation" that arises when the individual with an inherent "sense of freedom" comes in conflict with the "bewildering coils" of the "network" of natural laws. Yet, he goes to say, it is not enough to simply depict one of these "fatal combinations" of personality and circumstance; one must do so while "reflecting" upon the situation a sense of "blitheness and repose"—*Heiterkeit*—that ennobles the subject matter, making the conflict a "spectacle of the dignity, not the impotence of the human spirit."[126] Though hardly serene, the child's thoughts upon releasing the starling have the distanced tranquility usually found when considering something that seems less a real problem than a philosophical abstraction. In the plight of the mother bird, the child sees a particular example of a universal condition: the starling beating itself against the bars of its cage as a symbolic embodiment of this instinctual desire for freedom in conflict with the restraining network of natural laws. Its pain is in this way elevated, dignified, transformed into a tragic spectacle with which the child powerfully—though not fully consciously—identifies. Part of what makes this scene so affecting to the child is the revelation of his own complicity. His desire for a pet being the indirect cause of the bird's distress, his remorse is tied to a newfound awareness of how he, too, is bound up in this system, a part of "the great machine in things." The child's remorse—like that of Hopkins' famous Margaret—is not wholly unselfish, as there is obviously something deeply unsettling about the idea of nature as a "great machine" and of the living body (especially one's own) as an instrument or tool that operates independently of one's will. Yet, significantly, this does not lessen the aesthetic appeal of envisioning the experience of pain or beauty as something enacted on the body. To imagine suffering as a "pain-fugue" played upon a physical form wrought with "delicate nerve-work" is to externalize and aestheticize

[126] *The Renaissance* 184-185. This insistence upon the importance of freedom is quite reminiscent of Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man.*

the sensation, to make it something capable of being perceived and (it is hinted) appreciated, at least by those with what Pater calls, in reference to the child, a "strong innate sense for the soberer tones in things" (IP 15).

The experience with the starling—as with all of the experiences outlined in the text—serves to reinforce what Pater describes as "instinctual in [the child's] way of receiving the world"—that is, his need for a "sensible vehicle or occasion . . . the necessary concomitant of any perception of things" to make the experience "real enough to be of any weight or reckoning in his house of thought" (11). In the same way, Pater's narrative strives to make Florian's "house of thought" "real enough" to the reader by illustrating how its structure is based upon that of its own "necessary concomitant"—the child's first home—and how the "sensible vehicle[s]" with which the child therein comes in contact all have been incorporated into Florian's consciousness as parts of a complex system of visible symbolism, each moment a particular "thread" in the aforementioned "spiritual habit." It is the weaving of this spiritual habit that Pater aims to reproduce through the narrativizing of Florian's dream, in the process providing what might best be described as a map of consciousness. By continually presenting the child as the passive recipient of the ecstatic moments of perception that come to shape him so profoundly, Pater underscores the accidental nature of aesthetic experience, the way in which it is not something to be sought but something imposed from without, a resistless force that overawes those susceptible to it by an inherent "lust of the eyes." Though there is presumably a democratic impulse behind this idea—in that Pater refuses to deem certain scenes and objects (such as those one might encounter on a Continental tour) more aesthetically "valuable" than others—the stress that he puts on the arbitrary intersection of personality and place also masks a weird masochistic elitism. The fineness of the child's perceptual faculties is proven time and again by his capacity for

suffering, for enduring the pain and passion inspired by the violent infliction of aesthetic experience.

By putting the body of the aesthete at the center of the narrative, Pater grounds the subjective experience of beauty in the outside world, suggesting that the aesthetic faculties, even if they serve to whet appetites more than satisfy desires, offer the surest way of (temporarily but transcendently) escaping one's essential solitude by engendering feelings of contact and communication with what lies outside isolating individual frames of reference, a "world . . . wherein are water and trees, and where men and women look, so and so, and press actual hands" (12). Aesthetic education teaches Pater's child "a trick even his pity learned, [of] fastening those who suffered in anywise to his affections by a kind of sensible attachments." These sensible attachments are what save him from ultimate and irrevocable despair in the deaths of his closest companions:

> He would think of Julian, fallen into incurable sickness, as spoiled in the sweet blossom of his skin like pale amber, and his honey-like hair; of Cecil, early dead, as cut off from the lilies, from golden summer days, from women's voices; and then what comforted him a little was the thought of the turning of that child's flesh to violets in the turf above him. (12)

"Florian" derives comfort from the very floral idea of beautiful Cecil "in the sweet blossom of his skin" and Julian, now "cut off from the lilies," both live on in the "violets" that grow above their graves. Florian's imaginings illustrate the degree to which his aesthetic development has provided him with a means of reconciling himself to the individual's death by thinking of that individual as only one manifestation of an ongoing natural process of death and renewal. In the more historical imaginary portraits, the deaths of their protagonists serve a similar function. When living, they cast an "unreal, imaginary light upon [common] scenes and persons," which allows the rest of the world "to see . . . what makes life really

valuable" (37). In their deaths, they are sacrificed to the forces of change that they have instigated; it is a sacrifice that promises a period of cultural renaissance that they presaged and embodied but that they cannot live to see, as it is in the diffusion of the "aspiring soul" of the Paterian aesthete at the moment of his death that the rest of the world takes his place, becoming, like him, "a seeker after something in the world, that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all" (102, 43).

CHAPTER 5.

"Not things that I created, but things that haunt me": Aesthetic Complicity in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*

In the effort to understand just what Nathaniel Hawthorne meant by labeling his literary works not novels but "romances," it has become customary to look at his Prefaces and, to a certain degree, to take his word for it. Yet, to do just that in regards to his last completed novel, *The Marble Faun* (1860), raises certain questions that forces the reader to recognize how perceptibly this final romance differs from his earlier productions by virtue of its setting amidst what Henry James aptly described as the "denser, richer, warmer, European spectacle." Set in Italy, mostly in Rome, *The Marble Faun* is literally half a world away from the New England villages that provide the backdrop to his previous romances. More importantly, Hawthorne argues, the Italian scene is replete with those elements of "Ruin" on which "romance and poetry" thrive, those very same elements that are lacking in America, "a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight."[127] This difference, Hawthorne would have us believe, made this last novel less of a "trial" to the author than the earlier romances; already "a sort of poetic or fairy precinct," Rome exudes the "quality of strangeness and remoteness" that the romance-writer must otherwise create out of more ordinary materials. A prosaic setting can only become the site of romance when seen in "an unusual light," from an imaginative vantage point that Hawthorne once famously described as akin to looking in a mirror reflecting a familiar room illuminated by "a dim coal-fire" and "moonbeams." By "glancing at the looking-glass," one is almost magically transported to a "haunted

[127] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, ed. Susan Manning (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 4. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

verge" at "one remove further from the actual and nearer to the imaginative." Rome, though, as Hawthorne avers in the preface to *The Marble Faun*, needs no such imaginative sorcery; the city itself casts a spell that lingers long after one leaves it. As evidence, he recounts his surprise at seeing "the extent to which he had introduced descriptions of various Italian objects, antique, pictorial, and statuesque" into his novel (4). He presents the pervasive presence of aesthetic artifacts in the text as proof of Rome's ability to haunt, even possess, the viewer, making it impossible to keep depictions of "these things . . . from flowing out upon the page, when one writes freely, and with self-enjoyment" (5).

Yet, if Hawthorne intended for his preface to explain (away) the persistent fascination with aesthetic experience manifested throughout *The Marble Faun*, it falls far short of its goal, for it seems rife with contradictions. For one thing, how does one write "freely, and with self-enjoyment," when in thrall to the ghosts of myriad beautiful objects that presumably dictate what it is that one writes? More to the point, from what aspect of these seemingly harmless "descriptions of various Italian objects" does the author feel the need to distance himself by performatively abdicating agency? Hawthorne's *Italian Notebooks*, a collection of the journals that he kept throughout his sojourn in Italy, show him to be as haunted by art during his time in Italy as he was afterwards. Unlike the preface, though, this haunting is not represented as guiding the unconscious author into a kind of aesthetic automatic writing; instead, Hawthorne, as a spectator, describes himself as haunted mostly by a conscious awareness of the massive effort it will take to accurately capture his impressions in a textual medium:

> There is but one little interval when the mind is in such a state that it can catch the fleeting aroma of a new scene . . . And it is always so much pleasanter to

> enjoy this delicious newness than to attempt arresting it, that it requires great force of will to insist with one's self upon sitting down to write.[128]

While one could read Hawthorne's journal entry simply as a more truthful description of the writing process, a process that the preface—specifically, its confident assertion of a writer's creative freedom—retrospectively attempts to obscure, I would argue that the two passages placed in relation to one another stand as testaments to an abiding and shaping preoccupation in *The Marble Faun*: the question of whether acts of aesthetic perception incur for the viewer any moral or social responsibility. In both cases, Hawthorne seems most concerned with whether the spectator might be accountable for and to those impressions generated by perceptual experience. With the preface, his anxious dislocation of those representations of art objects in the text from the realm of the plot—the former being the product of unconscious and spontaneous appreciation, the latter of conscious and laborious thought—strives to preemptively distance that plot from any morally dubious connotations attached to the Italian objects described. In his journal, he implies that while it might be his inclination to simply "catch," "enjoy," and then release "the fleeting aroma of a new scene," he feels somehow compelled to expend the "great force of will" necessary to "arrest" his impression in writing. Just what forces Hawthorne to do what he claims to be unaware of doing or unwilling to do is never specified, but the very vagueness of the impulse lends to it a haunting, almost deterministic quality. Moreover, by lingering on in memory and resurfacing, unbidden, in his writing, these encounters with Italian objects take on a significance that is rendered all the more mysterious in that the author seems reluctant to wholly avow it.

Hawthorne's ambivalence towards the representation of art objects and aesthetic experience finds even greater expression in *The Marble Faun* itself, where

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[128] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, vol. 10: *Passages from the French and Italian Notebooks* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1902) 47-48.

the actions of its four principal characters—three artists (Miriam, Hilda, and Kenyon) and one beautiful living art object (Donatello)—are constantly molded by and take the mold of real and fictional works of art. Hardly the irrelevant outcroppings of a mind still suffused with the Italian scene, certain artworks described in the romance serve as narrative touchstones, signaling hidden motivations and buried secrets that hurry the story along to a series of tragic climaxes. In the unstable relations between the characters and various beautiful objects, Hawthorne explores what might be called the double-bind of aesthetic experience. Striving to mentally and artistically "capture" the essence of a work of art, the characters risk being themselves "captured," exposed by and involved in the fundamental mysteries of human experience of which it is a symbol.[129] While these mysteries are only fleetingly and fragmentarily apprehended, the imperfect knowledge that the characters attain from their perceptions reveal a complex network of affinities and connections that binds the four of them together more inextricably and in ways more morally complicated than sheer sympathy might.

Though vague enough in the particulars to have provoked angry readers of the first printing to clamor for an explanatory postscript (which Hawthorne appended to the next edition), the basic plot of *The Marble Faun* is rather beautifully simple. In Rome, four friends—Kenyon, a straitlaced American sculptor; Hilda, a virginal American painter; Miriam, a beautiful half-Jewish painter of obscure origins; and Donatello, a young Italian count whose manners and looks make him an exact replica of Praxiteles's famous statue of a faun—live an ostensibly idyllic life within a community of expatriate artists, until Donatello kills a mysterious figure from Miriam's past who had been relentlessly pursuing her, an act that Hilda witnesses. In the aftermath of the murder, the group splinters, each to undergo separate trials, until

[129] It is worth adding here, though, that this capturing and being captured is a tension known more to the writer of aesthetic experience than the visual artist, since the moment of aesthetic experience is drawn out, revisited, and, in short, temporalized, in the act of writing and in the remembering that writing requires.

reunited at the very end, at which point Donatello turns himself into the Italian authorities, Miriam assumes the life of a Catholic penitent, and Kenyon and Hilda leave Italy to settle as a married couple in America. What transforms this seemingly fundamental human drama into "the stuff of romance" is its setting within the sprawling, museum-like setting of Rome, a space where, for Hawthorne, almost every scene demands aesthetic valuation but almost every paving-stone is tainted by the mark of some unspeakable crime. Throughout *The Marble Faun*, nearly every narrative episode takes place in the midst of or in proximity to some symbolically—and historically-replete object or site, informing even the most commonplace of activities with a dark and awful sense of precedence that borders on the Uncanny.

In an atmosphere in which viewers are continually haunted by the dark past of even the most beautiful and illuminating of sights, where even "the very dust . . . is historic," it is not surprising that the aesthetic encounter is an especially fraught mode of experience. Although Hawthorne initially describes aesthetic impressions as belonging to "a frame of mind" that takes viewers "into a certain airy region, lifting up . . . their heavy, earthly feet from the actual soil of life . . . and reliev[ing] them, for just so long, of all customary responsibility for what they thought or said" (15), this cheery picture is belied by the majority of perceptual experiences in the romance, which far from relieving its fictional spectators from the "customary responsibility" of their thoughts and actions, actually weighs them down further with a burdensome knowledge of "the secret of guilt or grief" (160) that is the animating mystery at the center of the art object's appeal. That this hidden "sorrow or sin" is made visible and, in some ways, legible only to those whose faculties allow them "moments of deepest insight" lends to aesthetic experience a peculiar social and ethical dimension (124); these characters, through their visual apprehension of the terrible secrets at the heart of an object or scene, become to some degree responsible for those secrets. This sense of

responsibility is what begins to transform perceptual experience from a benign act of *sympathy* (a key Hawthornian term) into a more problematical assumption of *complicity*.

Complicity most broadly defined is "partnership in an evil action" [OED], but it is the very openness of the term "partnership" that allows it to be applied to what seem wholly discrete forms of activity and, as is the case more often, non-activity. Legally, to be complicit is to be capable of being held responsible for a crime which one did not perpetrate. Morally, though, complicity can mean many things; as Christopher Kutz describes it, complicity can mean that one is "connected to harms and wrongs, albeit by relations that fall outside the paradigm of individual, intentional wrong-doing," [130] but in Judith Lee Kissell's formulation, complicity can also be understood as a more general "toleration of wrong," being cognizant of harmful actions being committed by others but eschewing any sense of personal responsibility for stopping or denouncing those actions.[131] Complicity, as its etymology suggests (from the Latin *complicitas*—noun of state from *complex*), is a concept that is rooted in intricacy and indeterminacy, which stems from the fact that it is meant to span the divide between the private and the public selves, between the individual's thoughts and feelings and the laws and duties imposed on the individual by society. One is complicit in instances when the private and public selves come into opposition—when, for instance, an individual witnesses what could be read as a threat to another and yet, from the desire to remain untainted and unburdened by an explicit knowledge of the reasons for that threat, fails to engage or intervene.

It is exactly this aspect of complicity that makes it a useful term for thinking through the social implications of the aesthetic encounter, as such encounters are

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[130] Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 1.
[131] Judith Lee Kissell, "Complicity in Thought and Language: Toleration of Wrong," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 20:1 (1999): 49.

represented in *The Marble Faun.* For Hawthorne, to discern through the medium of one's impressions the existence of traumas and crimes occurring outside one's sphere of action and even in the long-distant past or potentially in the future raises the question of the individual's relation to the society in which one is both an actor and an observer. Of course, this question is an aesthetic as well as an ethical one; the pressure on the viewer to conform to a socially-accepted standard of aesthetic judgment is analogous to the pressure on the citizen to conform to a socially-accepted standard of morality. In *The Marble Faun*, though, these pressures are nearly indistinguishable, because every act of aesthetic perception has moral and social ramifications. Throughout the romance, almost every effort made by a character to "seize the subtle mystery" of the work of art is witnessed by another character, and, since for Hawthorne, there is nothing so revealing *of* viewers as how they see (and how they look to others when they see) an art object, the person watching the viewer becomes, in essence, a witness to whatever truths about that viewer come to the surface in the act of viewing. If the witness misreads or, more damningly, chooses not to acknowledge the significance of he or she has read in the spectacle of another's aesthetic encounter, then this person becomes complicit in the viewer's future actions.

In *The Marble Faun*, the single tragic action around which the entire narrative revolves is Donatello's murder of Miriam's mysterious tormentor—who is only referred to as "The Model." In the major aesthetic encounters leading up to this event, all four characters—Kenyon, Hilda, Miriam, and Donatello himself—each bear witness, as it were, to strange affinities that their friends as viewers have with various art objects, strange affinities that, in different ways, all presage the configuration of circumstances that lead inexorably to the tragedy to come. How the collective failure of this "aesthetic company" to account for and respond to certain powerful resemblances and revelations on display in the moment of aesthetic encounter makes

each of them complicit in the Model's murder is a central preoccupation of the characters in the crime's aftermath. Finding themselves simultaneously self-estranged and bonded to each other in a kind of guilty intimacy, the four friends must work through the loss of what might be called their aesthetic innocence, as their previous mode of perceptual experience is altered by a new sense of themselves as moral agents even when in the role of aesthetic observers.

Besides the four friends, there is another silent witness and accomplice in Hawthorne's romance: Rome itself. The city's myriad public museums, private galleries, numerous studios, and innumerable ruins provide the backdrop that lends to these aesthetic encounters the weighty sense of historical precedent. Hawthorne describes the feeling of the foreign visitor to Rome in terms greatly similar to those of the romance-writer, standing before a mirror and seeing the "poetic or fairy precinct" in the familiar-yet-unfamiliar room reflected therein. In Rome, the narrator says in the first chapter, the visitor enters into a "state of feeling" inspired by "a vague sense of ponderous remembrances; a perception of such weight and density in a by-gone life, of which this spot was the center, that the present moment is pressed down or crowded out, and our individual affairs and interests are but half as real, here, as elsewhere" (8). Rome's spatial juxtaposition of past and present make the entirety of the city a kind of "haunted verge," where the distinction between "the real" and "the imaginary" is difficult to discern, and the present takes on a "dreamy character" from its proximity to "the square blocks of granite wherewith the Romans built their lives" (8). This dynamic unsettling of boundaries in Rome generally carries over into the realm of aesthetic experience, where the offsetting of the "dreamy present" of life in the Italian capital with ancient "blocks of granite" finds more specific expression in the relation between the dream-filled lives of viewers and the marble statues and antique frescos they contemplate. Ultimately, by setting his story within this kind of space—where art

objects and aesthetic scenes constantly provide concrete analogues to otherwise indescribable states of human experience—Hawthorne revises his conception of the romance. In doing so, his text casts a retrospective, aestheticizing gaze over the narrative genre it is in the process of transforming. From the other side of the mirror, as it were, *The Marble Faun* finds in the shared experience of art a means of accessing a psychological reality that demands of the viewer not the distanced sense of sympathy but a more immediate and more conflicted awareness of complicity in "the denser, richer, warmer, European spectacle" which Italy provides.

Jonah Siegel, in his study of what he calls the "art-romance tradition," describes *The Marble Faun* as "inescapably a romance about the encounter with Europe in one of its most fraught manifestations, the play of study, evaluation, emulation, synthesis, assimilation, and rejection that takes place when contemporary artists respond to the art of the past."[132] Certainly, the principal characters in Hawthorne's romance, in their admittedly fraught aesthetic experiences in Rome, do all of these things, but not necessarily in that order. Siegel's enumeration suggests a fixed process, an exorcism of sorts in which the artist figure moves through a series of stages, the result of which is a final release from an enthrallment to Europe and to the past. While such a progress narrative is at the heart of the standard künstlerroman (though the result of such a release is often fatal), in *The Marble Faun,* with the exception of one unfinished bust of Donatello, all of the artwork created by Miriam, Hilda, and Kenyon is, for all intents and purposes, finished before the story begins. Though each produces at least one painting, drawing, or sculpture that provokes a strong reaction from the others, these works of art have much the same function in the text as Classical statues and Renaissance paintings; they serve as staging-grounds for the spectacle of the aesthetic encounter. In fact, Hawthorne's decision to make three

[132] Jonah Siegel, *The Haunted Museum: Longing, Travel & The Art-Romance Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005) 125.

of his main characters artists seems less about presenting them as skilled creators of beautiful objects than as skilled viewers of those objects. As serious and—the text assures us—recognizably gifted artists, Miriam, Hilda and Kenyon are thus differentiated from the average aesthetic-tourist, who views Rome through the lens of guide-books and other kinds of travelogues and whose experiences are prescripted to the point of becoming empty re-enactments, like the "party of English or Americans" scornfully mentioned by the narrator, who, when "paying the inevitable visit by moonlight" to the Coliseum are only capable of "exalting themselves with raptures that were Byron's [from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*], not their own" (120). The artwork created by Hawthorne's characters testifies to a perceptual acuity and emotional authenticity lacking in this sort of tourist; though his characters are shown to be as, if not more, cognizant of the shaping influence of cultural narratives like Byron's poem on their impressions of the Italian scene and its many revered objects, their success as artists depends on seeing things for themselves.

Hawthorne's protagonists are distinguished from the shifting "tide of foreign residents" in Rome from the beginning, as the story opens with the four friends in the Capitol sculpture gallery, the three artists having just "been simultaneously struck by a resemblance between one of the antique statues, a well-known masterpiece of Grecian sculpture, and a young Italian, the fourth member of their party" (8). The first of many such impressions of uncanny similitude, Miriam, Kenyon, and Hilda's discussion of the resemblance between Donatello and Praxiteles' statue of a faun also sets the tone for subsequent aesthetic encounters. As their debate concerning the physical likeness between man and statue gives way to more fragmentary and yet more revealing reflections on the significance of this resemblance—of what it might mean if Donatello truly were "the very faun of Praxiteles," a reincarnation of a creature belonging to some "long-past age"—the scene takes on the aspect of a

collective hallucination. The innate susceptibilities of the viewers to art and to each other transform what began as a whimsical suggestion into a miraculous possibility. When questioned by Miriam if she too sees the similarity, Hilda replies, "Not quite—almost—yes, I really think so . . . the resemblance is very close, and very strange," as if the similarity between Donatello and the faun comes into focus while she speaks. Her conclusion is then supported by Kenyon, who deems the likeness "wonderful" and again by Miriam, who echoes Hilda almost exactly: "But how strange this likeness is, after all" (13).

But, what is the nature of the "nameless charm" of this idea? Though despairing of the inadequacy of words to describe the statue's "magic peculiarity," the narrator nevertheless attempts to explain the wonder of Praxiteles' creation in a way that seems an inverted image of what the three artists see in Donatello's resemblance to it. The faun, we are told, is "unlike anything else that ever was wrought in that severe material of marble" because what is captured in the statue seems antithetical to its medium. The epitome of a warm and sensual animality, the faun is a creature in which "brute creation meet and combine . . . with humanity," the "mute mystery" of its appeal stemming from it being a holdover from "a period when man's affinity with Nature was more strict, and his fellowship with every living thing more intimate and dear" (10-11). An art object that somehow represents a time before art was necessary (man's connection with Nature being so close as to obviate the need for mimetic representation), Praxiteles' statue gestures towards a mode of being in which there was no estrangement between man and his environment. Yet, even to try to imagine such a time, the narrator suggests, is to acknowledge the impossibility of its recurrence; put into language, "the idea grows coarse, as we handle it, and hardens in our grasp," becoming as much a monument to a lost antiquity as the faun itself (11).

In Donatello's startling resemblance to the statue, though, Miriam, Kenyon, and Hilda are given a fleeting glimpse of the faun come back to life, an impression that does not solve its "mute mystery" but instead makes felt to the viewers how far they are from the uncomplicated and harmonious state of nature it inhabits. If the faun has "nothing to do with time" or "sin, sorrow, or morality itself," the viewers' common sense of distance and difference from it underscores how much they do have to do with these things. Hilda's "shrinking" perplexity when contemplating the faun's "sensuous, earthy" charm, Kenyon's regret at the idea of the faun as an extinct interpreter between man and nature, Miriam's grief that she too cannot live having "no conscience, no remorse, no burthen on the heart"—all of these reactions speak to an awareness of the laws and obligations imposed in a moral universe, where desire is policed, nature alienated, and actions judged (13). Their aesthetic appreciation of Praxiteles' faun is thus bound up with their ethical sensibilities, sensibilities that Donatello's likeness to the statue suggests he does yet not share.

The three friends notice prior to the visit to the statue gallery that "indefinable characteristic about Donatello, that set him outside the rules," but it is in the "half-deep, half-mirthful impression" produced by "the resemblance between the marble Faun and their living companion" that this characteristic is given form and rather ominous narrative implications (13-14). Initially—when the artists see the man and the statue together—the similarity is strong enough for Kenyon to playfully argue that Donatello must be immortal as "Praxiteles carved on purpose for him," but the longer they look at the two, the less Donatello seems a statue and the more the statue resembles a living man. This change is first suggested by Hilda, who suddenly exclaims that "looking . . . too long . . . instead of a beautiful statue, immortally young, [she sees] only a corroded and discoloured stone" (15). Similarly, at the beginning of the scene, the enchanted possibility introduced by "the realization of the antique Faun,

in the person of Donatello" causes the viewers to imagine that all the "marble ghosts" in the gallery might awaken—"Antinous," "Apollo," "Bacchus," and other fauns and satyrs among them—and "join hands" with their friend. Yet by the time they turn their gazes to a "sarcophagus," where "the exquisitely carved figures might assume life, and chase each other round its verge with that wild merriment," the sight becomes shaded with "some subtile [sic] allusion to Death, carefully veiled, but forever peeping forth amid emblems of mirth and riot" (16).[133]

The fragile atmospheric balance between the fantastic and the real sustaining the moment begins to shift, and with it, the certainty of the viewers regarding their perceptions gives way to doubt. Moving beyond the point where the statue is visible, Miriam confides to Hilda that she is no longer sure of "the reality of this likeness of Donatello to the Faun," and, moreover, she asserts, the resemblance "never struck me as forcibly as it did Kenyon and yourself, though I gave in to whatever you were pleased to fancy" (16). Beyond the moment of aesthetic encounter, what was experienced as a magical kind of *sensus communis* is recollected as willful complicity in the "fancies" of others "for the sake of a moment's mirth and wonder" (16). Yet considering that it was Miriam who first introduced the idea of Donatello's similarity to the faun, her retrospective claim to have imaginatively given into what she saw to be false strikes a discordant note, the self-consciousness of her disavowal drawing even more attention to her coded expressions of regret and misery when faced with the "happy ignorance" displayed by Donatello and the faun. Hilda's belief in their shared impression likewise does not survive the encounter, and looking at Donatello out of proximity to the statue, she is amazed to find "[h]ow sad and sombre he has grown, all of a sudden," a change that proves attributable to his sighting of Miriam's strange persecutor, whose penitential garb makes him seem just "stept [sic] out of a picture,"

[133] Here we have what also seems an allusion to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," an allusion, though, that leads to a very different conclusion.

hence his moniker, "The Model" (17). While Hilda ascribes this sudden alteration to the simple variability of expression, which organizes "the same set of features" into widely dissimilar formations, her passing observation proves to be a premonition of sorts, as Donatello's later murder of the Model he is now angrily beholding will erase his resemblance to Praxiteles's faun irrevocably. What is more, the aesthetic encounter shared by the four friends in the sculpture gallery stages, in miniature, the larger narrative drama of Donatello's transformation, a transformation that Hawthorne's original title for the romance, *The Transformation of the Faun*, made the centerpiece of the romance.[134] As it is in the perceptions of the three artists that Donatello first becomes a resident of Arcadia and then a "sad and sombre" exile from it, so to does their involvement with him create the circumstances that result in his actual banishment from the enchanted state of nature he previously inhabited. Their complicity (Miriam's especially) in his real transformation is strangely anticipated by their shared impression of him in the gallery, an impression that once affirmed is almost immediately and uncomfortably denied.

Yet Hawthorne's conception of aesthetic complicity cannot be reduced to merely a dim prescience of events to come. While it is suggested throughout *The Marble Faun* that in moments of aesthetic contemplation viewers become possessed of a kind of knowledge that lies beyond the boundaries of language and even conscious thought, the uncanny resemblances between viewers and art objects serve a variety of narrative purposes, another being to make visible (if still largely unintelligible) the weight and continuing influence of the past. In a later aesthetic encounter—when

[134] See *The New International Encyclopedia*, vol. 8, ed. Daniel Coit Gilman (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1906) 42. Hawthorne's proposed title, curiously, was split in half, each part serving as the title for the English and American versions, respectively. Titled *Transformations* when first published in the UK, it was retitled *The Marble Faun, or the Romance of Monte Beni* in the American edition. I would argue that by splitting up Hawthorne's proposed title, both editions obscure the significance of this opening episode, which focuses not on transformations (generally) or Praxiteles' Marble Faun (specifically), but the dynamic process by which Donatello loses his resemblance to the statue, transforming into something else entirely.

Donatello visits Miriam's studio—a series of sketches by Miriam gestures towards a dark history all the more impacting for not being brought to light. Donatello visits owing to Miriam's wish that he model for a painting of a "rustic dance," but this picture is never to be painted, and focal point of the scene is not Donatello's likeness but Miriam's. The resemblance becomes a great deal more complicated in this instance, as it emerges cumulatively, through Donatello's viewing of images that are scattered throughout the room. As with the sculpture gallery, the artist's studio is for Hawthorne an enchanting, uncanny sort of space, "one of those delightful spots that hardly seem to belong to the actual world"; Miriam's studio seems like

> the outward type of a poet's haunted imagination, where there are glimpses, sketches, and half-developed hints of beings and objects, grander and more beautiful than we can find anywhere in reality. The windows were closed with shutters, or deeply curtained, except one . . . admitting only . . . that partial light which, with its strongly marked contrast of shadow, is the first requisite to seeing objects pictorially." (34)

That Hawthorne describes the studio as the embodiment of *the poet's*, not *the painter's*, "haunted imagination" suggests that his interest in art objects has more to do with aesthetic experience than artistic representation. The studio affords glimpses into the realm of half-conceived ideas that is the basis for myriad forms of inspiration. A reliquary for fictional "beings and objects" not to be found "anywhere in reality," the studio spatially represents the moment of consciousness just prior to the creation of the work of art, when the artist is attempting to translate and concretize into a visual or textual medium an as-yet-unformed impression.

Though it is precisely this kind of space that makes artistic creation possible, what interests Hawthorne more is that its arrangement—particularly the careful manipulation of light and shadow—is "the first requisite of seeing objects pictorially." To see pictorially is to see "by means of a picture or pictures" or "in the manner of a picture" [OED], which allows for the possibility of two related perceptual activities: to

see a live scene as if it were a picture (created for viewing and meant to convey something to the viewer) or to come to an awareness through the contemplation of an art object or a series of art objects of some truth that lies beyond them. In Donatello's visit to Miriam's studio, both of these modes of seeing pictorially are in evidence, and together, they contribute to the heavy atmosphere of foreboding that speaks to the continuing influence of dark, unspoken events in the past. Donatello's sensibilities first register the tangible presence of history in Miriam's studio, when, looking into a gloomy corner, he mistakes Miriam's lay-figure—the mannequin used to accurately represent the human body in different postures and costumes—for a real woman, a woman to whom he immediately ascribes a dreadful past and a potentially sinister motive. Working the magic that the narrator attributes to it, the enchanted space of the artist's studio causes Donatello to see pictorially; no longer simply a room crowded with a jumble of beautiful objects, it is imaginatively transformed into a *tableau vivant* that seems staged for his benefit: "[i]n the obscurest part of the room, Donatello was half-startled at perceiving, duskily, a woman with long dark hair, who threw up her arms, with a wild gesture of tragic despair, and appeared to beckon him into the darkness along with her" (34). Though only lasting an instant, Donatello's impression is at once complex and narratively-charged; the mannequin, half-shadowed and with limbs akimbo, presents itself to his imagination like Eurydice at the tragic moment of her return to the underworld. As a witness to this scene, Donatello feels himself involved in it; as he tells Miriam, "[w]hen my eyes first fell upon her, I thought her arms moved, as if beckoning me to help her in some direful peril." Spectatorship again comes burdened with a sense of responsibility, and, though Miriam dismisses Donatello's vision as a "sinister freak[] of fancy," her attempt to distract him with various paintings and sketches she had done only further reinforces his initial

impression, lending it additional emphasis and clarity through a profusion of analogous images.

Much like the art studio itself, the first "great pile and confusion of pen-and-ink sketches, and pencil-drawings" that Miriam has spread out, upon Donatello's perusal, come to seem anything but confused (35). In fact, in their subject matter and manner of depiction, they are almost identical; each sketch is of a female figure from the Old Testament who is caught in an act of rebellious violence against a man. Jael driving the stake through the head of Sisera, Judith cutting off the head of Holofernes, Salome holding the head of John the Baptist on a platter, in each case, a "stern Jewess" is decapitating a male figure who in some way oppressed her. Beyond this similarity, the narrator also points to a certain originality and uniqueness of conception that distinguishes Miriam's treatment of these biblical stories from how they have been "represented by the Old Masters so often" before (36). Yet, these revisions, as their descriptions imply, were not the artist's intention, but rather, re-visions of her original ideas, which fell initially along more conventional lines. In the drawing of Jael, the narrator detects that Miriam's "first conception" had been to present her as an image of "perfect womanhood . . . but dissatisfied either with her own work or the terrible story itself, Miriam had added a certain wayward quirk of the pencil, which at once converted the heroine into a vulgar murderess." In much the same way, her sketch of Judith gives the impression of having begun "with a passionate and fiery conception of the subject, in all earnestness," but by the end, the "last touches" were done with "utter scorn, as it were, of the feeling which at first took such possession of her hand." Even the story of Salome, though its initial "conception appeared to be taken from Bernardo Luini's picture, in the Uffizi gallery in Florence," is transformed by Miriam's hand at the last minute, lending to Salome not the typical look of vengeful satisfaction, but rather that of "womanhood . . . at once awakened to love and

endless remorse" (36). Hawthorne's repetition of the word "conception" has the effect of conferring on the original, now over-drawn image, the status of artistic creation. Moreover, the creation is no sooner completed than its creator assesses it critically and then adds a series of "last touches" that have less to do with fixing it than with scornfully marking her rebellion against the more conventional perspective on the narrative that she formerly attempted to convey. Miriam's "quirk of the pencil" is much like Donatello's "freak of fancy" in that it registers her reaction to the image before her, recording the result of her aesthetic encounter with her own artwork. In these finishing strokes, Miriam inscribes her own perspective "on these stories of bloodshed, in which a woman's hand was crimsoned by the stain," leaving behind on paper the visible trace of her dark and guilty past, the shaping influence behind the sketches.

Donatello's dramatic response to these images only confirms the ominous significance that the narrator "reads into" Miriam's sketches. Shuddering, his face assuming "a look of fear, trouble and disgust," Donatello rapidly shuffles through the pile of drawings until "finally . . . he shrank back from the table and clasped his hands over his eyes." By covering his eyes and refusing to see what is right in front him, Donatello seeks to deny what his own expression betrayed only a moment before: that he has seen *in* or *through* the pictures some truth about Miriam of which he would have wished to remained ignorant. That Miriam herself wishes the same thing becomes clear a moment later, when she apologizes for directing his attention at that pile of drawings, calling them "ugly phantoms that stole out of my mind; not things that I created, but things that haunt me" (37). Here "seeing pictorially" is a mode of comprehension seemingly divorced from agency. Though facilitating a moment of understanding between Donatello and Miriam, this understanding is not actively sought nor is it openly avowed. Rather, their bond is based on a shared sense of

hauntedness; the ghosts that "stole" out of Miriam's mind now also trouble Donatello. Also, by describing her sketches as "ugly phantoms" that emerged unbidden by her, Miriam perpetuates an understanding of the art object as itself haunted, a remnant of some prior moment in history that continues to bear witness to the circumstances that brought about its creation.

Yet, if the sketches in this first instance are ghostly reminders of shadowy events in the artist's past, the remainder of the scene suggests that there are myriad ways in which an art object or a viewer may be visibly or visually haunted. Hawthorne introduces another kind of aesthetic hauntedness when Miriam, in an attempt to distract Donatello from the sketches that so unsettled him, gives him another portfolio, this one full of "domestic and common scenes, so finely and subtly idealized that they seemed such as we may see at any moment, and everywhere; while still there was the indefinable something added, or taken away, which makes all the difference between sordid life and an earthly paradise" (37). Again, images that might otherwise have been merely conventional—in this case, of sentimental and more orthodox feminine subjects, scenes of courting couples and delicate sketches of baby shoes—are transformed by an "indefinable something" into revelations of the Ideal in the everyday. Here, however, as the narrator points out, the "profound significance" of the pictures lies somewhere other than in the past of the artist. Miriam's "youth" makes it quite improbable that she has experienced "the bliss and suffering of woman" depicted in her sketches, and besides, "it is more delightful to believe, that, from first to last, they were the productions of a beautiful imagination, dealing with the warm and pure suggestions of a woman's heart" (38). Yet, as the determinedly optimistic but implicitly skeptical nature of the phrase "it is more delightful to believe" suggests, the strange magic at work in Miriam's pictures is likely the product of more than just her lovely imagination and womanly heart. These sketches, like the previous pile that

Donatello rifled through, are also animated by a sort of revisionary impulse, that here manifests itself through a common element present in each image: that of an almost hidden figure that, in one case, "peeped through the branches," and, in another, "look[ed] through a frosted window from the outside," a figure "always depicted with an expression of deep sadness . . . the face and the form [which] had the traits of Miriam's own" (38). If the first batch of pictures were, as Miriam claimed, things that haunt her, these are ones which Miriam herself haunts. As both a viewer of and outcast from the "common life" she so compellingly depicts, Miriam makes visible her feelings of distance and alienation from the domestic happiness that typically "belongs to woman." The "quirk" of these images comes through in Miriam's attempt to distinguish herself—as a woman—from what the narrator suggests *should be* her rightful sphere. She creates these scenes only to "relinquish[], for her personal self" any claim to them, and in this gesture, Miriam again betrays how the past shapes the present as well as the future. Pictures haunted by what is never to be, they negatively foreshadow what is to come; in them, Hawthorne imaginatively posits a number of potential happy endings (all resolutions typical to the romance genre), while, at the same time, implying that his own narrative will follow another path.

Again, Donatello's negative reaction to this second batch of images reinforces the portentous subtext that the narrator reads into the pictures. Continuing this pattern--in which Miriam's darkly pessimistic perspectives on conventional subjects is forcefully impressed on her doomed admirer—the chapter ends with her treating Donatello to one final artwork, this time a portrait that she claims "has been shown to no one else." With only this ominous preface, she turns "to her easel, on which was placed a picture with its back turned towards the spectator" and reverses the canvas, at which point,

> there appeared the portrait of a beautiful woman, such as one sees only two or three, if even so many, in all a lifetime; so beautiful that she seemed to get into your consciousness and memory, and could never afterwards be shut out, but haunted your dreams, for pleasure or for pain; holding your inner realm as conquered territory, though without deigning to make herself at home there. (39)

While Donatello might be the first and only "spectator" of the portrait within the narrative, this final aesthetic encounter in Miriam's studio signals that its intended audience is the reader. The painting, dramatically unveiled by Miriam, "appear[s]" like a revelation before an unsuspecting Donatello, who functions mainly as a narrative stand-in or placeholder for the reader, the "you" on whom the image has such a profound effect. Infiltrating the viewer's psyche, the beauty of the portrait's subject overawes both "consciousness and memory," an effect that—it is intimated—lingers long after the eye is turned away. Again described as a form of haunting, the effect of this portrait on the viewer is more clearly articulated here than in the previous two aesthetic encounters, in which the reader is left to gauge the sketches' power mostly through the medium of Donatello's reactions. In this instance, the narrator makes clear what it means for the art object to haunt the viewer; it is for the beautiful image to capture the viewer's imagination and hold it as a ruler would hold a "conquered territory," taking away the sovereignty of one's "inner realm" but, at the same time, ruling over it only *in absentia.* A form of occupation defined less by presence than by absence, in the mind of the viewer it creates a sense of self-alienation and *unheimlichkeit,* in that the trace left behind by the beautiful image choosing not "to make herself at home there" transforms this inner realm into an unfamiliar and potentially threatening space. Also, having lost the ability to imaginatively self-govern, the viewer is, to a degree, in thrall to this captivating representation of a lovely women with "a Jewish aspect," in the same way, the narrator says, as the biblical Jacob was to Rachel when "he deemed her worth the wooing seven years" and as

"Holofernes" was when "vanquished" by the beauty of Judith, she "slew him for too much adoring it" (39).

In the description of the painted woman's "black, abundant hair . . . Jewish hair, [of] a dark glory such as crowns no Christian maiden's head" and in the likening of her beauty to that of Old Testament heroines, the narrator hints at what is not revealed to the reader until Miriam asks Donatello if he recognizes the image: that picture is not just a portrait, but a self-portrait of Miriam. The narrator explains the reason for delaying "to speak descriptively of Miriam's beauty earlier in our narrative" and for withholding the portrait's identity until after it is described as "we foresaw this occasion to bring it perhaps more forcibly before the reader" (40). Rather than "more forcibly," the narrator might have said "more pictorially," as Miriam's beauty is communicated through the series of haunting images she created, in which, in different ways, she herself is present. If the first batch of sketches haunt Miriam, and Miriam herself haunts the second portfolio of pictures, in this third object described—her self-portrait—these two energies come together, and it is not the just artist or the image that is haunted, but also the reader. And, being haunted by Miriam's beauty, both Donatello and the reader are given a means of seeing pictorially into her character and, through her artwork, of coming into a dim awareness of her hidden torment and suppressed rebelliousness regarding past events that continue to shape her existence.

Yet, if, as the narrator intimates, Miriam's self-portrait "conveyed some of the intimate results of her heart-knowledge" and she shows the painting to see "whether they would be perceptible to so simple and natural an observer as Donatello," his reaction reinforces the fact that this visual mode of understanding cannot be fully articulated in language. When questioned by Miriam as to whether he likes the painting, he answers, "Oh, beyond what I can tell . . . so beautiful, so beautiful." An

affective response so strong as to resist verbal representation, Donatello's repetition of the phrase "so beautiful, so beautiful" hearkens back to the narrator's remark that the painting's subject is "so beautiful" as to enchant and enslave the consciousness of her viewers. However, this beauty's fascination is located in its unfathomability, like the eyes of the painting's subject, "dark eyes, into which you might look as deeply as your glance would go, and still be conscious of a depth you had not yet sounded" (39). Donatello's sounding of the depths of Miriam's many artistic productions is a shifting dynamic of impression and expression; the profoundly sad and arrestingly vengeful expressions of her various subjects (which, tellingly, are what have been changed or added with her persistent, last minute quirk of the pencil) elicit Donatello's ambivalent and similarly troubled impressions of the works generally.

As for the self-portrait, Miriam next questions Donatello as to whether, liking its form, its expression also pleases him. He answers, "yes . . . if it would only smile so like the sunshine as you sometimes do. No; it is sadder than I thought at first. Cannot you make yourself smile a little, Signorina?" His request provoking a "bright, natural smile" from the real Miriam, he exclaims, "Oh, catch it now! . . . Let it shine upon the picture! There; it has vanished already! And you are sad again, very sad; and the picture gazes sadly forth at me, as if some evil had befallen it in the little time since I looked last" (40). Like the scene in the sculpture gallery with the faun of Praxiteles, the perceived resemblance between the human Miriam and her painted double fluctuates from moment to moment, and it is in the pattern of these fluctuations that Hawthorne encodes Donatello's growing awareness of Miriam's character; he learns that she too is "sadder than [he] thought at first," and it is through his comparison of her brief expressions of transcendent, forgetful happiness to her more general demeanor of tormented unhappiness that he comes to realize that "some evil had befallen" her, an evil that inexorably continues to push the narrative towards its

climax. Recognizing finally that Miriam and her self-portrait are true mirrors of each other, both gazing "sadly forth" at him, Donatello's aesthetic experience in Miriam's studio comes full circle, and the chapter concludes with an observation that more coherently communicates what he only imperfectly grasped at the beginning. Responding to his perplexity at the painting's expression, Miriam tells Donatello to search for "other faces" and to "never more gaze at mine," to which he replies, "You speak in vain . . . shroud yourself in what gloom you will, I must needs follow you" (41). Having experienced Miriam's many expressions of hauntedness in her artwork, Donatello finds himself bound to her, complicit in a shadowy crime that has yet to take place. Donatello's initial impression of Miriam's lay-figure—that she was "beckoning [him] to help her in some direful peril"—is thus retrospectively validated. What he has seen pictorially, through the images scattered throughout the enchanted space of Miriam's studio, has awakened in the formerly simple and innocent Donatello a consciousness of the complexity of circumstances that determine human destiny and of his own entanglement therein. Yet, if Donatello is depicted as leaving Miriam's studio resigned to the inevitability of his involvement, Hawthorne hints also that the reader (for whom Donatello is a stand-in for much of the chapter), unless one stops reading, is similarly complicit, and prevented from any other action than following Miriam into the dark.

What is to be made, though, of individuals who refuse to acknowledge or involve themselves in situations of which they have become aware through the act of spectatorship? To what degree are these viewers complicit in the past sins and future crimes from which they attempt to distance themselves? In counterpoint to Donatello's experience among Miriam's pictures, Miriam's visit to the studio of the sculptor Kenyon offers a scenario in which the shared contemplation of an art object exposes the strange culpability Hawthorne ascribes even to those characters that would

remain willfully blind to the secrets such moments bring to the surface. In this scene, it is Kenyon who demonstrates an overly fastidious reserve when faced with the unsettling implications of his friend's emotional identification with one of his own artistic productions. Yet, even before this event takes place, the narrator anticipates Kenyon's reaction with a critical meditation on the creative process of a sculptor. This introductory description, with its focus on the typical studio space of a sculptor, draws an implicit comparison with the studio of a painter, thus pitting against each other two-dimensional visual arts (painting and drawing) and three-dimensional plastic arts (sculpture). Whereas Miriam's studio is depicted as an enchanted space, full of props and artfully-arranged lights and shadows, Kenyon's, as it is argued is generally the case with sculptors, is "but a rough and dreary-looking place, with a good deal the aspect, indeed, of a stone-mason's workshop" (90). Mostly bare, its only noted adornments are "some hastily scrawled sketches of nude figures on the white-wash of the wall . . . probably the sculptor's earliest glimpses of ideas that may hereafter be solidified into imperishable stone, or perhaps may remain as impalpable as a dream." In noting the widely divergent nature of the two possible fates facing these sketches—either an eternity in marble or, otherwise, oblivion—the narrator establishes how far apart are the two poles of the extensive process by which a sculpture is brought into being. The narrator next fills in the steps in between the "impalpable dream" and "the final marble"; there is the hasty sketch, then the "very roughly modeled little figures . . . exhibiting stage of the Idea," then "the exquisitely designed shape of clay," then the "plaister-cast." And, between the plaster-figure and the finished marble sculpture is a change of even more significance: the work goes from being molded and shaped by the hands of the sculptor himself to being copied by a master-carver, a man of "merely mechanical skill" whose task it is to translate the model of sculptor into its ideal medium, marble.

That the modern sculptor does not carve his design with his own hands marks a profound break between the artistry demonstrated by "the ancient artificers" like Praxiteles. Nowadays, the narrator says satirically,

> The sculptor has but to present these men with a plaister-cast of his design, and a sufficient block of marble, and tell them that the figure is imbedded in the stone, and must be freed from its encumbering superfluities; and, in due time, without the necessity of touching the work with his own finger, he will see before him the statue that is to make him renowned. His creative power has wrought it with a word. In no other art, surely, does genius find such effective instruments, and so happily relieve itself of the drudgery of actual performance. (90)

This description alludes to Michelangelo's famous fresco, *The Creation of Adam*, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, in which God is animates Adam through the touch of a single finger. Where even God's creative process requires a finger, the narrator mocks, modern sculptors need only "a word." Ironically, the sculptor's art is among the most permanent, as the excavations in and around the Roman capital at that period attested. The modern sculptor's "renown" also potentially has a much longer shelf-life, but this renown is partially undeserved, as the final "immortal" object is carved not by him but by "some nameless machine in human shape" (91).

Given the number of nineteenth-century sculptors complimented throughout *The Marble Faun* (among them Harriet Hosmer, Hiriam Powers, and William Wetmore Story, all, like Hawthorne, American expatriates in Rome at that time) and that most of the sculptures attributed to the character of Kenyon were modeled on works that Hawthorne had seen in their studios, it seems unlikely that Hawthorne was entirely dismissive of sculpture as a modern art form. So, what might have been the purpose of this critique, particularly as a prelude to the scene that follows? The general rumination of the situation of the modern sculptor brings to the fore the question of responsibility, responsibility understood as the individual's obligations to

an outside entity or circumstance to which he or she is somehow connected. In the case of the modern sculpture, the narrator observes, sculptors gain renown for art objects that are not entirely their own creation. Yet, at the same time, "this endless endurance, this almost indestructibility of a marble" makes their creative decisions weightier, in that their works will last to become testaments to eras that have long since passed. The images that they commit to stone should therefore be carefully chosen, with an eye towards posterity and a sense of accountability to the present.

In some ways, the representation of Kenyon lives up to this ideal of the modern sculptor, or at least modern sculpture. He is described as possessing a face "which, when time had done a little more for it, would offer a worthy subject for as good an artist as himself; features finely cut, as if already marble; an ideal forehead, deeply set eyes, and a mouth much hidden by a light brown beard, but apparently sensitive and delicate" (91). He is a man of marble, in both senses of the phrase, but, as his display to Miriam of his two most prized creations suggests, these same qualities come with a stony inflexibility and cold reserve that distances him from the world he has tasked himself to represent. Out of the objects he shows Miriam, most revealing of this dynamic is a sculpture he keeps hidden in "a little, old-fashioned, ivory coffer . . . richly carved with antique figures and foliage": "a small, beautifully shaped hand, most delicately sculptured in marble," the hand of their mutual friend, Hilda (94). Miriam recognizes the identity of the hand's possessor immediately and attributes Kenyon's skill in capturing its likeness, "its maiden palm and dainty finger-tips," to the fact that he "must have wrought it passionately." Yet, she says, "I did not dream you had won Hilda so far! How have you persuaded that shy maiden to let you take her hand in marble?" Kenyon either not acknowledging or getting the joke—that a "hand in marble" is a more permanent and perhaps even more impressive accomplishment than winning that same hand in marriage—he claims that the

sculpture is “a reminiscence” he “stole” from Hilda, now “reproduce[d] to something like the life” (95). Though a symbol of his unspoken and unrequited love, Kenyon’s copy of Hilda’s hand and his treatment of it reveal a love of a complex, somewhat angst-ridden nature. Though it is “like the life,” he keeps the hand out of sight, housed in the jewel-box equivalent of a sepulcher; never touched or kissed, even (it is mentioned) by the sculptor himself, the sculpture is less an art object than a religious artifact, bearing an unsettling resemblance to the Catholic reliquaries which so unnerved Hawthorne during his time in Rome. Moreover, as a synecdochal substitute for Hilda herself, the hand is a curious choice on Kenyon’s part, as it is her skill as a painter and her devotion to copying the works of the Old Masters that keep her outside the earthly sphere of romantic love; Kenyon despairs of ever winning her precisely because her artistic aspirations make her “utterly sufficient to herself” (95). For this reason, his decision to steal her hand, even in the figurative sense, has an aggressive undercurrent to it, which Miriam notices, when she tells him, in slightly mocking consolation, that there is always the possibility that Hilda “perhaps may sprain the delicate wrist which you have sculptured with such perfection.”

That Kenyon’s relationship to his creations is as potentially fraught as Miriam’s is clear from his sculpture of Hilda’s hand, but it is Miriam’s encounter with his unfinished masterpiece—the clay-model of what is to be a marble statue of Cleopatra—that reveals the degree to which Kenyon’s mastery over his chosen medium is indicative of a temperament resistant, even hostile, to the revelatory aspect of shared aesthetic experience. Unlike the Cleopatras of Bronte’s *Villette* and Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, Kenyon’s statue does not represent a voluptuous odalisque but rather the Egyptian queen seated in a pose of gloomy abstraction:

> A marvelous repose . . . was diffused throughout the figure. The spectator felt that Cleopatra had sunk down out of the fever and turmoil of her life, and, for one instant—as it were, between two pulse-throbs—had relinquished all

> activity, and was resting throughout every vein and muscle. It was the repose of despair, indeed; for Octavius had seen her, and remained insensible to her enchantments. (98)

The narrator's emphasis on the figure's "marvelous *repose*" makes a distinction between this attitude of self-forgetful inactivity and the deliberately seductive lounging *pose* typically associated with Cleopatra; Kenyon's statue depicts her in the spatial equivalent of a dramatic aside, in a posture all the more illuminating for not seeming staged. Also, the narrator intimates, by representing Cleopatra "between two pulse-throbs," between familiar narrative moments (that of her failed seduction of Octavius after Antony's death and her own eventual suicide), Kenyon's statue puts the viewer in an uncharacteristic relation to the Egyptian queen. Instead of a surrogate for Antony or Octavius—viewing an image of Cleopatra whose function is to seduce and enchant—the spectator is privy to a secret scene outside the history books, catching a fugitive glimpse of her private, not her public, self.

This hidden aspect of Cleopatra is presaged in a conversation between the two artists about nudity and artistry. Right before Kenyon literally unveils the Cleopatra (kept obscured underneath a sheet), Miriam voices a hope that it is not a "nude figure," as, in her opinion, "now-a-days, people are as good as born in their clothes, and there is practically not a nude human being in existence." Thus, she argues, a modern artist "cannot sculpture nudity with a pure heart, if only because he is compelled to steal guilty glances at hired models," and "the marble inevitably loses its chastity under such circumstances" (97). Paralleling the narrator's earlier critique of the process of modern sculpture, Miriam's indictment of contemporary sculptural representations of "indecorous womanhood" rests on a contrast of the current situation with that of antiquity: "an old Greek sculptor, no doubt, found his models in the open sunshine, and among pure and princely maidens, and thus the nude statues of antiquity are as modest as violets, and sufficiently draped in their own beauty." Miriam imagines the

Greco-Roman world presenting mankind in a prelapsarian aesthetic state, in which nudity could be tastefully and modestly depicted because, with no sense of shame or sin, there was nothing to cover up. People today, "practically born in their clothes," now come into the world with something to hide, with guilty secrets that they would rather keep concealed. From this perspective, the whole process of sculptural representation is corrupted, from the sculptor's very first "guilty glances" at his "hired models" (96). Even the Neo-Platonic theory of sculpture to which Kenyon ascribes (and Miriam shares)—that each block of marble contains within it a particular form or "human countenance within its embrace [that] must have existed there since the limestone ledges of Carrara were first made" (91)—takes on a slightly seedy aspect, as, by Miriam's account, the sculptor no longer is simply freeing the statue from its marble prison but exposing it to the potentially censorious appraisal of the outside world. It is an act of violation as much as an act of creation; the statue "inevitably loses its chastity under such conditions," and both sculptor and viewer, in varying degrees, are complicit in its degradation.

Strangely reinforcing Miriam's condemnation of modern sculpture, the narrator lauds Kenyon's molding of the Cleopatra in language more suitable to the heroic vanquishing of a mortal enemy, only strengthening the association between certain forms of artistic representation and brutal public demonstrations of supremacy and control. The sculptor's success is measured by the amount of force necessary to wrest the hidden figure from a resistant medium; in the Cleopatra, "difficulties, that might well have seemed insurmountable, had been courageously encountered and made flexible to the purposes of grace and dignity" (98). The difficulty here alluded to is that of exposing "the truth" of what this sculpture is supposed to represent without sacrificing the aesthetic standards that sculpture is supposed to meet. As with the elaborate costume, including the "stiff Egyptian head-dress," it is faithfully copied

from “the strange sculpture of that country,” but also “softened into a rich feminine adornment without losing a particle of its truth” (98). Similarly, the visage of Cleopatra herself is described as a testament to Kenyon’s “courage and integrity,” as “the sculptor had not shunned to give the full Nubian lips, and other characteristics of the Egyptian physiognomy,” by which the figure’s “beauty shone out richer, warmer, more triumphantly, beyond comparison, than if, shrinking timidly from the truth, he had chosen the tame Grecian type.” Significantly, Kenyon’s uncompromising adherence to the truth divests the Cleopatra of some of her authority; by turning her royal head-dress as a “feminine adornment” and by stressing her ethnicity, he marks her, both in terms of gender and of race, as Other. Though the statue is still, in the words of the narrator, “all Cleopatra—fierce, voluptuous, passionate, tender, wicked, terrible, and full of poisonous and rapturous enchantment,” her power now lies no longer in her role as captivating monarch but in that of seductive captive (99). As a statue of a beautiful and exotic female form, the Cleopatra’s sphere of influence is limited to her effect on the viewer, in her ability to evoke an eroticized aesthetic response. Forged out of Kenyon’s triumphant technical overmastering of a resistant material and subject, the statue is soon to be in a similarly captive relation to the viewer, as once “apotheosized in an indestructible material, she would be one of the images that *men keep forever*, finding a heat in them which does not cool down throughout the centuries” (99, emphasis mine).

What makes the statue captive to the viewer, though, is not the viewer’s aesthetic response to it. It is the viewer’s ability to control that response, to potentially subordinate feelings of attraction or admiration to one’s critical faculties, to rational assessment and judgment. Indeed, the moment in Cleopatra’s history that Kenyon chose as his subject—a private moment immediately after “the cold eyes of Octavius” had “seen her, and [he] remained insensible to her enchantments”—gestures towards

an unsuccessful aesthetic encounter in which the beautiful object has failed to move a particularly unsympathetic spectator (98). The scene to which the narrator here refers is most probably from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*: in Act V, after Mark Antony's death, Cleopatra attempts to win over the ever prudent Octavius Caesar, who easily resists her personal charms when he considers the political advantage of putting her on public display as a captive back in Rome. It is to avoid being made a spectacle before the populace that Cleopatra commits suicide-by-asp, an effort that is somewhat ironically thwarted by that fact that it is in her death-pose that most artists choose to depict her. Kenyon's statue steers clear of the necrophilic worship of the dead, beautiful female body, but, as the remainder of the chapter demonstrates, his decision to sculpt the living queen in the posture of defeat and despair is itself rather morally dubious, suggesting a strange disaffection for the object he has created. This attitude comes to the surface when Miriam comments on the miraculously real and complex "womanhood" displayed in the sculpture, asking him, "did she never try—even while you were creating her—to overcome you with her fury, or her love? Were you not afraid to touch her, as she grew more and more towards hot life, beneath your hand?" (99). Though Miriam's questions are meant as compliments to Kenyon's skill, the emphasis she lays on the tactile aspect of the sculptural arts again colors the relationship between sculptor and creation with the threat of erotic violence. But, in this instance, it is the artist who is imagined as on the defensive, vulnerable to being "overcome" by the "fury" and "love" of his creation to the same degree that he is capable of bringing it to "hot life" with his skill.

As Miriam's formulation makes clear, what Kenyon might have to fear from his sculpture is his own responsibility for it, for bringing it to some semblance of complicated and tormented life. Yet, it is precisely this responsibility that Kenyon

eschews, when he describes to Miriam the process by which the Cleopatra came into being:

> It is the concretion of a good deal of thought, emotion, and toil of brain and hand . . . But I know not how it came about, at last. I kindled a great fire in my mind, and threw in the material—as Aaron threw the gold of the Israelites into the furnace—and, in the midmost heat, uprose Cleopatra, as you see her. (99)

Certainly Susan Manning is correct when she claims that Kenyon's comparison of himself to the biblical Aaron (who idolatrously created the Golden Calf out of the jewelry of the Israelites) "suggests the ambiguous resonances of his own creative activity for a Puritan consciousness."[135] At the same time, there is arguably more to this curious simile than a half-suppressed Protestant uneasiness with graven images; Kenyon's likening of his mind to a rough kiln out of which his creation magically "uprose" (rather like Aphrodite rising out of the waves) deliberately obfuscates the artist's intentionality. Though Kenyon admits to being the instrument through which the Cleopatra was wrought, his description of the creative process obscures his conscious determination of the final product. This disavowal of agency gives to Kenyon's artistry a fugitive aspect, signaling an unwillingness to openly acknowledge the "secret" that Miriam reads within it.

Repeating a pattern found throughout *The Marble Faun*, Kenyon's attitude towards his sculpture and the tormented passions it embodies presages his attitude towards his friends and the hidden events in their pasts that weigh on the narrative. In this instance, recognizing that in the Cleopatra Kenyon grasped the "secret" of the figure's essential "womanhood . . . mixed up with all those seemingly discordant elements," Miriam is encouraged to speak of her own secret. She begs Kenyon, as one who "sees far into womanhood," to receive into his "large view" her confidence. His

[135] Susan Manning, note 99, *The Marble Faun*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 367.

response to this request reproduces the surreptitious avoidance of responsibility and involvement that marked his relationship to the Cleopatra. Though he voices a willingness to hear whatever Miriam has to tell him, she detects "a certain reserve and alarm in his warmly expressed readiness to hear her story" (100). The reason given is that "in his secret soul, to tell the truth, the sculptor doubted whether it were well for this poor, suffering girl to speak what she so yearned to say, or for him to listen . . . for the more her secret struggled and fought to be told, the more certain would it be to change all former relations" between them. Yet, no sooner are Kenyon's reasons for his disinclination to hear Miriam's confession articulated than those reasons are revealed by the narrator to be paltry self-justifications masking a truth about himself he would rather not reveal:

> This was what Kenyon said to himself; but his reluctance, after all, and whether he were conscious of it or no, resulted from a suspicion that had crept into his heart, and lay there in a dark corner. Obscure as it was, when Miriam looked into his eyes, she detected it at once. (100)

In the space of two paragraphs, the narrative shifts modes twice, moving from direct speech (Kenyon's statement to Miriam) to a kind of free indirect discourse (the narrator speaking from and through Kenyon's point-of-view) to a more distanced and critical third-person omniscient perspective (the narrator exposing the sculptor's true—if unacknowledged—motivations). This layering of what Kenyon says to Miriam, what Kenyon says to himself, and what Kenyon truly feels reveals the intricacy of conscious stratagems and unconscious subterfuges that underlie and complicate even the most seemingly "frank and kind" of responses. What Kenyon cannot admit to himself is that, if Miriam's secret is fighting and struggling to be told, he is just as actively attempting to repress that utterance, under the guise of sympathetically preventing her from making an exposure that she would later regret. Thus, sympathy becomes a means of rationalizing suspicion; because he believes

himself to be acting on Miriam's behalf, Kenyon can excuse or otherwise overlook less generous reasons why he might want to avoid hearing her secret. Much like his behavior with the Cleopatra, Kenyon's oppression of Miriam's desire for expression takes shape as a concern for form, in this case, for the forms of polite social discourse. He tells himself that her confession would destroy the "relations" between them, ruining their friendship by forcing a degree of intimacy that it cannot sustain. Yet he already suspects her of crimes for which he is unwilling to allow her to vindicate herself, which suggests that this intimacy already exists, albeit only in his displacement of his suspicion onto the statue that embodies the guilty womanhood of which Miriam is the obvious model.

That Miriam detects his reluctance and, more to the point, grasps the real reasons for it merely by looking into his eyes further extends the parallel between this scene and the narrative back-story attached to the statue. Cleopatra's despair is described as the result of her failure to kindle "a tropic fire in the cold eyes of Octavius," and, similarly, Miriam's is rooted in her recognition that Kenyon, in spite of what he says, has already refused her the solace and aid she is so desperately seeking. Denied an outlet, she turns on him, exclaiming, "Ah, I shall hate you . . . You are as cold and pitiless as your own marble" (100). Earlier in the text, Kenyon was called "a man of marble," but at this moment, that moniker takes on new and unpleasant associations, implying a certain moralizing inflexibility and critical detachment that is part and parcel of the "large view" Miriam believed would engender his sympathy on her behalf. Though he attempts to defend himself, claiming that he is "but full of sympathy, God knows," Miriam now recognizes the limitations of this particular social affinity and she tells him to "[k]eep your sympathy, then, for sorrows that admit of such solace" (100-101). For one to be "admitted of" some kind of sympathetic fellowship, it seems, one's "sorrows" must be untainted by guilt or

responsibility for what caused those sorrows. More to the point, at least to Kenyon's understanding, sharing those sorrows through sympathy must in no way burden or obligate the sympathizer; his reluctance to act as Miriam's confessor is bound up in an awareness that—whatever her secret must be—hearing it would involve him in it, making him complicit by association. Thus, the failure of *his* sympathy, in this instance, might be understood as the failure of sympathy generally to bridge the expanse between those who are tormented by the association with some past sin and those who remain fortunately free of such complicating relations.

In the scene immediately prior to Miriam's entering Kenyon's studio, her desire to visit the sculptor is explained as motivated by a feeling of "infinite, shivering solitude," which is "one of the most forlorn results of any accident, misfortune, crime, or peculiarity of character, that puts an individual ajar with the world." "Very often," the narrator continues, "as in Miriam's case, there is an insatiable instinct that demands friendship, love, and intimate communion, but is forced to pine in empty forms; a hunger of the heart, which finds only shadows to feed upon" (89). Again skirting the exact nature of Miriam's dark secret, this description of just what puts an individual "ajar with the world" also reveals the complexity of Hawthorne's notion of guilt. Dismantled from the comforting binary opposition with innocence, guilt in *The Marble Faun* is the product of any sort of experience that forces upon the individual the unwelcome, isolating knowledge of things that cannot be openly avowed to or shared with others. That Kenyon has glimpsed this knowledge through witnessing Miriam's aesthetic encounter with her marble double and refuses to acknowledge it seems to suggest, on his part, a willful, hypocritical ignorance, which is further evidenced by his request that the next time they meet it be "in the same clear, friendly light as heretofore" (101). Miriam denounces this subterfuge, and tells him, "You are less sincere than I thought you . . . if you try to make me think that there will be no

change" (101). Instead of giving her the true "intimate communion" she desired, the sculptor only offers Miriam the "empty forms" of polite social intercourse, another shadow in place of the substance she is seeking. For him to claim that they might return to seeing each other in the "clear, friendly light" of their previous interactions adds insult to injury, as it announces his determination to turn a blind eye to what he has just seen, an act that, though he does not know it, makes him more complicit in the tragedy that follows than he would have been complicit—had he been willing—in the tragedies of the past. When Miriam leaves Kenyon's studio, she briefly debates returning in order to "compel him to listen," but decides against it, concluding finally that her secret is a "dark-red carbuncle—red as blood— . . . too rich a gem to put into a stranger's basket." That Kenyon, who, prior to the scene in his studio, was deemed "[n]ext to Hilda, the person for whom Miriam felt most affection and confidence" is now offhandedly referred to as "a stranger" evidences how completely the suppression of Miriam's confession has altered the nature of their relationship (88). When Miriam leaves Kenyon, only to find "her Shadow"—the mysterious monk—waiting for her in the street below, his presence only further reinforces what she learned from her aesthetic experience in Kenyon's studio: that her "hunger of the heart" must go unsatiated, with, as the narrator said before, "only shadows to feed upon."

If the scene in Miriam's studio recasts the story of Orpheus and, all of the talk in this scene about Kenyon bringing the Cleopatra to life gestures towards another myth, that of Pygmalion and Galatea. The story of a once deeply misogynist sculptor whose love for his finished creation is so great that it magically brings the ivory figure to life, the Pygmalion myth represents the aesthetic encounter as a mutually-transformative experience, capable of animating a dead marble object and also, perhaps as miraculously, of reviving the deadened sensibilities of the creator and viewer. Yet, the scene in Kenyon's studio differs from its mythic proto-narrative in its

abortive conclusion; nothing comes to life (or to light, for that matter) and the sculptor remains unchanged by and undetached from the secrets that his creation brought to the surface. This lack of resolution—the hallmark of all the aesthetic experiences in *The Marble Faun* before Donatello's murder of Miriam's Model—signals the failure of sympathy alone to break through the barriers erected by the polite forms of social discourse that determine how the individual engages with the world. That said, though the aesthetic encounter in Kenyon's studio does not lead to the revelation of Miriam's secret, it does reveal another secret: the ultimate emptiness of those forms, both artistic and social, through which we simulate understanding, while remaining unfettered by the responsibilities true understanding entails.

When Hawthorne visited the Barberini Palace in Rome in 1858 and first saw Guido Reni's painting of what was then assumed to be Beatrice Cenci, he described it in his journal as an art object whose "spell is indefinable, and the painter has wrought it in a way more like magic than anything else." He goes on to say that, though it is "the most profoundly wrought picture in the world," he wishes "it were possible for some spectator, of deep sensibility, to see the picture without knowing anything of its subject or history: for, no doubt, we bring all our knowledge of the Cenci tragedy to the interpretation of it."[136] Not one to wait for divine intervention, Hawthorne grants his own wish in *The Marble Faun* through the character of Hilda, the virginal New England painter, whose innocent eye is capable of rendering a copy of the Beatrice Cenci, seemingly without the corrupting influence of its subject matter, then widely known owing to Shelley's play *The Cenci*, published in 1819. A Renaissance tale of depravity, incest, and patricide, the Cenci tragedy, like Miriam's past, is frequently alluded to in the novel but never disclosed. Though its backstory is only vaguely and fragmentarily referenced, the portrait of Beatrice Cenci functions in *The Marble Faun*

[136] Vol. 10: *Passages from the French and Italian Notebooks* 89-90.

as the keynote for the novel's broader meditation on the ethical enigma of aesthetic complicity. More specifically, Hawthorne uses Reni's depiction of Beatrice's mysterious expression to explore the ways in which innocence can be lost merely by bearing witness to the discovery "that sin is in the world" (159).

In Hilda's capacity to reproduce "Guido's very Beatrice" and thereby inspire the novel's most protracted and inclusive aesthetic encounter, the visual artist's talent for representation is again tied to her sympathetic faculties. Hilda's unparalleled skill as a copyist is attributed to the fact that she has sacrificed all individuality of perspective for the chance to more perfectly "catch and reflect some of the glory which had been shed upon canvas from the immortal pencils of old" (46-47). Sympathy is Hilda's "guiding light" in the act of aesthetic appreciation; thus, her copies are not mimetic in a technical so much as in an emotional or spiritual sense. Going "straight to the central point, in which the Master conceived his work," she is described as able to view it "as it were, with his own eyes" and thus her copies are infused with "that evanescent and ethereal life—the flitting fragrance . . . of the originals." Yet Hilda's capturing of "the indefinable nothing, that inestimable something, that constitutes the life and soul" of the original artwork comes at the exclusion of other, earthier elements (48). As the narrator points out, Hilda rarely copies the whole of the picture, but only "some high, noble, and delicate portion of it," and she does not represent the original art object as it is—"darkened," "injured," or "retouched"—but rather as it might have looked "in its pristine glory" or even as "the great Master had conceived in his imagination, but had not so perfectly succeeded in putting upon canvas" (47-48). The narrator pronounces this ability "a miracle," a term that might be meant to be taken literally, as Hawthorne named his heroine after St.

Hilda of Whitby, the patron saint of the small North Yorkshire town where he wrote part of the novel.[137]

Yet, depicting her as an artistic saint (or martyr), whose wondrous paintings are produced seemingly through the will of God, only further reinforces the idea that Hilda herself is not ultimately responsible for her creations. While she is better than other copyists, who are derisively dubbed "Guido machines, or Raphaelic machines," she is still only a "finer instrument, a more exquisitely effective piece of mechanism" (48). Her artwork, unlike Miriam's sketches or Kenyon's statues, are not expressions of a unique vision or conception; they are acts of obeisance to the Old Masters to whom she has pledged herself a devoted "handmaid" (another term that the narrator begs us to take literally). Appropriately, Hilda's abode is not a proper studio space, but rather a kind of hermitage in the top of an old medieval tower, adjacent to a shrine to the Virgin Mary. Hilda tends to the oil lamp in front of the shrine, which "according to a legend which we cannot here pause to tell" must be kept alight at all times (42). Again reflecting the historical palimpsest of Rome, this legend weirdly puts the Protestant Hilda in the dual roles of Catholic nun and Vestal Virgin.[138] Of course, both feminine religious vocations share with Hilda's artistic vocation the sacrifice of one's "individual hopes" to the various gods one "love[s] and venerate[s]" (49). Also, as the spiritual duties of her religious predecessors were dependent on their chastity, so too is Hilda's innocence—her "purity of heart and life"—deemed integral to her success as a copyist (45). Loving the Old Masters "with a virgin's love," Hilda's "faculty of genuine admiration" is untainted by any trace of personal

[137] The genesis of Hilda's name is noted by several critics, including Hubert H. Hoeltje, who in *Inward Sky: the Mind and Heart of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1962), notes that "Hawthorne had christened [his character] Hilda, after that St. Hilda from whose abbey tower at Whitby" the author had visited while writing and revising the MF after his return from Italy to England: 506.

[138] The primary occupation of a Vestal Virgin was to tend to the sacred fire of the Goddess Vesta; to allow the fire to go out, thus endangering the welfare of the city, was a punishable offense.

desire or the knowledge of those profane materialities that might have corrupted the original artist's ideal conception. Thus, her sympathy is a state of pure reflection, a mirroring of whatever she sees or otherwise senses.

For the narrator, Hilda's decision not to contribute to "the already crowded and cumbered world" original compositions—which, however good, must fall "short, if by ever so little, of the best that has been done"—is a heroic act, and he encourages the reader to "let us try to recompense her in kind by adducing her generous self-surrender, and her brave, humble magnanimity" (49). Certainly Hawthorne does hold up Hilda as a model of these very qualities, but he leaves somewhat ambiguous why she needs to be recompensed. Is it simply that she has forgone the chance to be a recognized as an original artist, or is there something more fundamental that she has sacrificed in her chaste devotion to the great Renaissance painters? In an especially poetical description of Hilda's talents, the narrator claims that she removes the original picture "from the dark, chill corner of a gallery—from some curtained chapel in a church, where the light came seldom and aslant—from the prince's carefully guarded cabinet, where not one-eye in thousands was permitted and behold" it and brings it, in her reproduction "into daylight, and gave its magic splendour for the enjoyment of the world" (49). While this seems a democratizing gesture, removing the painting from its secluded and shadow-filled home (be it corner, chapel, or cabinet) risks taking the text out of its proper context. By thrusting the painting into the direct sunlight of decontextualized public scrutiny, much like scrubbing from one's copies the corrupting touches of man or time that mark the original work, Hilda denies the art object its embeddedness in place and history. That it can be viewed potentially anytime or anywhere, in a condition that evidences none of the limitations of technique or medium, changes the terms of its reception. The painting is no longer a testament to what was; instead, it is a testament to what might have been.

That said, Hilda's crystalline purity of perception, her wholly reflective sympathy, allows her to succeed where others have failed in transferring from "image to canvas" what in Hawthorne's opinion is "the very saddest picture ever painting or conceived": the portrait of Beatrice Cenci (51, 52). The perfection of her copy is validated by Miriam, who visiting Hilda in her hermitage, pronounces it "the greatest miracle you have yet achieved." What makes the painting so difficult to replicate (besides the fact that its owner at the time, Prince Barberini, refused to allow copyists to set up their easels before the picture) is the indefinable but unmistakable impression produced by the expression of its subject:

> The picture represented simply a female head; a very youthful, girlish, perfectly beautiful face, enveloped in white drapery . . . The eyes were large and brown, and met those of the spectator, but evidently with a strange, ineffectual effort to escape . . . The whole face was quiet; there was no distortion or disturbance of any single feature; nor was it easy to see why the expression was not cheerful . . . But . . . it involved an unfathomable depth of sorrow, the sense of which came to the observer by a sort of intuition. It was a sorrow that removed this beautiful girl out of the sphere of humanity, and set her in a far-off region, the remoteness of which—while her face is so close before us—makes us shiver as at a spectre. (51-52)

In Michael Fried's influential distinction between artworks exhibiting "absorption" (the seeming unawareness of an audience) and those exhibiting "theatricality (a performative awareness of the audience), Hawthorne's description of the Beatrice Cenci seems to carve out a middle space. In the opinion of the narrator, the mystery of the painting lies in its subject's self-conscious attempt to avoid the scrutiny of the spectator, "a strange, ineffectual effort" that engenders in the viewer a frisson of uneasiness at the disjunction of what is so physically close being so emotionally remote. Again, the root of alienation is not simply sadness but rather "an unfathomable sorrow" that isolates the sufferer from the rest of humanity. Beatrice's essential otherness, on some level incomprehensible to anyone but her, is what

previous copyists have been unable to render, though not for lack of trying. Hawthorne, through Miriam, pokes fun at the proliferation of sub-par Beatrice Cencis that flooded the Roman art market in the nineteenth-century.[139] She likens the situation to a hall of mirrors in a fun-house: "everywhere we see oil-paintings, crayon-sketches, cameos, engravings, lithographs, pretending to be Beatrice, and representing the poor girl with blubbered eyes, a leer of coquetry, a merry look, as if she were dancing, a piteous look, as if she were beaten, and twenty other modes of fantastic mistake." This grotesque concatenation of false Beatrices underscores the potentiality for the subtle mystery of the painting to be misinterpreted and cheapened when reproduced by lesser artists. Hilda, though, is praised for having captured "Guido's very Beatrice; she that slept in the dungeon, and awoke betimes, to ascend the scaffold" (52). Miriam's distinction here boils down to the difference between "doing" and "being"; the expressions of the other Beatrices all can be explained by either actions (crying, leering) or causes (dancing, being beaten), but Hilda's Beatrice *is* Reni's Beatrice, and since Reni was alleged to have done the portrait with the real model right in front of him, just prior to her execution, Hilda's Beatrice thus *is* the doomed lady herself. If, according to Miriam's formulation, one false Beatrice only spawns another, her explanation of Hilda's true copy conflates model with artwork and original with copy, all being identical to her on account of the "mysterious force" that animates that elusive expression.

Yet, it is precisely the relation between the copy and the original that is troubled in the two friends' discussion of the painting, a discussion that signals the limitations of the kind of perceptual or apprehensive sympathy that characterizes Hilda and her art. After Miriam praises Hilda's copy of the Beatrice Cenci, she asks her

[139] Interestingly, proving Hawthorne's point years after the fact, a casual search of Ebay today usually will yield at least a few, very dubious copies of the Beatrice Cenci, in any one of the mediums Miriam mentioned, all obviously mementos brought back from various Grand Tours.

friend to "interpret what the feeling is, that gives it such a mysterious force." Hilda's response is almost identical to that of the narrator's, given just a few paragraphs before; while she admits to being unable to put the exact feeling into words, she says,

> I felt all the time as if [Beatrice was] trying to escape from my gaze. She knows that her sorrow is so strange, and so immense, that she ought to be solitary forever, both for the world's sake and her own . . . she is a fallen angel, fallen, and yet sinless; and it is only this depth of sorrow . . . that . . . brings her within our view even while it sets her beyond our reach." (52-53)

Hilda's interpretation of the painting's effect expands on the narrator's by way of a seeming contradiction; she explains the strange sense of alienation that infuses the painting by deeming Beatrice Cenci a "fallen angel, fallen, and yet sinless." Hilda's evaluation here picks up a philosophical thread that runs throughout the narrative regarding the aesthetics of secrets. Just how should the viewer attempt to make sense of the elusive expression of either living person or artistic representation thereof, particularly if that elusive expression seems rooted in the wish to elude scrutiny? A secret is something that, for whatever reason, must be kept hidden, and when its presence is espied by an outsider, it raises the possibility that its possessor deserves some form of judgment. Yet, because the secret, by its very nature, is something private, the only thing that can be speculated on is what feeling motivates this desire for privacy. In *The Marble Faun*, two types of emotion most demand privacy: guilt and grief. Both originate in some past occurrence for which the individual still suffers, some "accident, misfortune, crime, or peculiarity of character, that puts an individual ajar with the world" (88). The main difference is that guilt is a form of suffering tied up with a feeling of personal responsibility. Yet, from the outside, there is no way to differentiate between guilt and grief; both cloak the individual in a kind of embarrassed reserve that alienates the viewer, setting the sufferer "beyond our reach." That even Hilda, who initially acquits Beatrice of having sinned,

acknowledges that "sorrow so black as hers oppresses her very nearly as sin would," underscores how indistinguishable are the two emotions to an audience with no other information than that gleaned from the individual's expression.

Yet, as Hawthorne's journal entry intimated, to aesthetically comprehend the ambiguity of the Beatrice Cenci's expression, the viewer must be capable of suspending judgment on the real woman's tragic history. When Miriam, having already questioned Hilda's initial assessment, claims that, to her, Beatrice's innocence is "not so plain" and that she is not sure Beatrice, from "the dim region, whence she gazes so sadly and strangely at us" would acquit herself "of something evil, and never to be forgiven," her doubt unsettles Hilda's certainty. When she goes on to remind Hilda of the "deed for which" the real Beatrice was beheaded, the copyist's opinion changes dramatically:

> "Ah," replied Hilda, shuddering, "I really had quite forgotten Beatrice's history, and was thinking of her only as the picture seems to reveal her character. Yes, yes; it was terrible guilt, an inexpiable crime, and she feels it to be so. Therefore it is that the forlorn creature longs to elude our eyes, and forever vanish away into nothingness! Her doom is just." (53)

Though diametrically opposed to her earlier judgment, Hilda's reassessment of the painting is similar in its moral absolutism. As she sees it, Beatrice can be either sinful or sorrowful, never both things at once. Miriam laments Hilda's severity in this instance and suggests that it is the product of the same character trait that makes Hilda such an excellent copyist: her innocence. Though Hilda's innocence allows her to imbue her creations with an especial emotional purity, it also renders her incapable of understanding or empathy in situations that are morally and aesthetically complex. Miriam describes Hilda's innocence as "like a sharp steel sword," and like King Solomon's sword before her, it works in absolute divisions and in categorical distinctions, never recognizing the complications introduced by the actual context in

which a particular deed occurred. It cannot appreciate that there might be such a thing as extenuating or mitigating factors, and therefore Miriam deems her friend's judgments "terribly severe," even if Hilda herself seems "all made up of gentleness and mercy" (53).

Once again a foil to Hilda, the Duessa to her friend's Una, Miriam offers an alternative worldview, a relativistic approach to the conundrum of the Cenci's guilt. As she tells Hilda, "Beatrice's sin may not have been so great; perhaps it was no sin at all, but the best virtue possible in the circumstances." Moreover, she proposes, if Beatrice viewed her action "as a sin, it may have been because her nature was too feeble for the fate imposed on her" (53). Seeking to present Beatrice's participation in the murder of her abusive father as to some degree justified by the situation, Miriam considers a tempting end run around the dichotomy of guilt and innocence. If Beatrice had no better option, can what she did really be considered a sin? And, if she persisted in viewing what she did as a sin, is it possible that her belief speaks only to her own intellectual limitations, rather than the truth concerning her actions? A neat piece of casuistry, Miriam's rationalization of Beatrice's crime is ultimately irrelevant, as it does not get to the source of the painting's mystery, which is not how Beatrice is viewed by the world but rather how Beatrice views herself. This question torments Miriam, causing her to exclaim, "if I could only get within her consciousness! If I could but clasp Beatrice Cenci's ghost and draw it into myself! I would give my life to know whether she thought herself innocent, or the one great criminal since time began!" (53). As in many of the aesthetic encounters in Hawthorne's novel, Miriam succeeds in this effort, but not exactly as she intended. As Miriam utters this wish, Hilda, looking "from the picture into her face . . . was startled to observe that her friend's expression had become almost exactly that of the portrait." Miriam does indeed "draw" the Cenci into herself, literally inscribing the ghostly outline of

Beatrice on her own visage, but in doing so, she only replicates the mystery; she does not solve it. Gesturing towards some fundamental similarity between her undisclosed history and the back-story attached to the art object she faces, Miriam's involuntary adoption of the look of Beatrice Cenci also signals the pertinence of "Beatrice's mystery"—the mystery of that expression—to the novel itself. From this early moment in Hilda's turret, the Cenci's strange, reluctant, side-long glance comes to signify the look of a kind of knowledge for which one is responsible but, for whatever reason, one cannot openly avow.

With the ghost of Beatrice Cenci, Hawthorne most clearly represents the act of aesthetic encounter as a kind of haunting, one that leaves a trace of itself behind on the viewer. In the Cenci, that trace is manifested in the side-long glance that communicates at once a sense of alienation from the rest of the world and a self-conscious awareness of its scrutiny. Miriam's momentary likeness to the Cenci signals that she is similarly haunted, that she too has been involved in some past deed with which she is afraid to be associated. Tellingly, Hilda does not recognize Miriam's revelation for what it is. Begging Miriam not to "look so," she marvels that she had never before "guessed" "what an actress" she is (53). Hilda's attribution of Miriam's passing resemblance to Beatrice Cenci to an aptitude for performance, an ability to assume "the look" of a certain state-of-mind, demonstrates that her copyist sensibility confines her to a knowledge of surfaces. She is unable to fathom a kind of similarity based on aesthetic *affect*, Miriam's replication of the Cenci's expression stemming from the painting evoking an unconscious, identical emotional response; in her mind, this duplication must be the product of artistic *effect*, a consciously constructed artificial posture. This crucial misreading reveals that unmediated perception can be as much a danger as a virtue. If Hilda's success as a copyist depends upon her possession of what Ruskin called an "*innocence of the eye*," "a sort

of childish perception of flat stains of color, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify," this perceptual innocence is also what renders Hilda perilously blind to the greater implications of symbols and gestures.[140] Her "pure vision," which is pure insofar as it is (in the words of W.J.T. Mitchell) "uncontaminated by imagination, purpose, or desires," obstructs her ability to see outside the frame, to recognize the art object's function as an analogue or a substitute, standing in for what must remain unseen or unsaid.[141]

But, as Hawthorne's novel underscores, even aesthetic innocence must undergo a (questionably) fortunate fall, and Hilda's witnessing of Dontello's murder of Miriam's Model awakens her to how perception can implicate individuals in crimes in which they have no *active* role. That being said, what is curious about Hawthorne's staging of the murder is that no single character—including Donatello, whose hands push the man over the precipice—is presented as wholly responsible for the Model's death. Rather, all three participants, Donatello, Miriam, and Hilda, are bound together in an exchange of guilty glances, which, on the one hand, absolves each of deliberate intent but, on the other, ties them all to the crime as inexorably as if they had plotted it out together. Initially focalized through Miriam's consciousness, the moment of the Model's death is given a hazy unreality by her sense of impending doom, as the Model emerges, horrifically animated, from the darkness of "a deep, empty niche, that had probably once contained a statue" (132). A grotesque reenactment of the Pygmalion story, the Model is presented as a marble form come to life, bearing down on Miriam,

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[140] John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1888) 22. In her introduction to *The Marble Faun*, Susan Manning, building off of the work of Pierre Bordieu argues that Hawthorne's representation of the "pure gaze" places the novel "on the cusp of a new understanding of aesthetic experience" that came out of 1860s French Impressionism: xxxii-xxxiii. While, at a later point, I can imagine Bordieu's theories to be greatly beneficial to this study, I would still argue that this aspect of Hawthorne's aesthetics evidences an indebtedness to Ruskin rather than to the Impressionists.

[141] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 118.

whose feeling of "cold, sick despair . . . impeded her breath, and benumbed her promptitude of thought." Watching the scene unfold with a detachment akin to an out-of-body experience, she "dreamily . . . remember[s] falling on her knees," from which vantage point she "beh[olds] herself as in a dim show, and could not well distinguish what was done and suffered; no, not even whether she herself were really an actor and sufferer in the scene" (132). As for Donatello, in murdering the Model, he does not see himself as acting under his own volition, but under Miriam's direction. He tells her afterwards, "I did what your eyes bade me do, when I asked them with mine, as I held the wretch over the precipice!" (134) And, finally, Hilda, having left the rest of their group of friends to find Miriam and Donatello, is poised at the threshold of a "little courtyard," and, looking through the doorway, sees occur "all in one breathless instant . . . the whole quick passage of the deed, which took but that little time to grave itself in the eternal adamant" (133). Though each registers the event differently, all their impressions have in common a distancing aesthetic framework. Miriam, whose position puts her in the same relation to the scene as a spectator in the orchestra is to the proscenium, views it as a dramatic spectacle, a "dim show" of violence and suffering which serves as a reflection of her own private emotions. Donatello, by contrast, is in the grips of a literary mindset; standing at the precipice of the Tarpeian Rock, the infamous peak from which ancient Romans hurled traitors to the Republic, he is thinking of his act in a broader mythological and historical context. "Conscious of the historical associations of the scene," he frames his murder of the Model as a re-enactment of a familiar narrative, that of a dangerous traitor to a community meeting his just end (131). Hilda, as is fitting, sees the event through the frame of the doorway, which renders the scene a picture—one that in its setting and subject bears a startling resemblance to the productions of the Old Masters--from which she is unable to look away. Experienced by all three not temporally (as a progression of actions)

but spatially (as a dramatic or narrative scene or visual image), the moment is frozen in time, rather like a *tableau vivant* in which they are all participants as well as observers.

The narrator pronounces this action of "one breathless instant" as henceforth graven "in the eternal adamant," and, certainly, the text bears out this statement by illustrating the various ways in which Donatello's deed almost artistically sculpts the remainder of the narrative, particularly as regards the bonds between the novel's quartet of main characters. A transformative moment, the murder of the Model is the final stage in a long process, one that fixes (or perhaps affixes) the social relations of the four friends, connecting them to each other in a way that was previously unimaginable. That Hawthorne is encouraging the reader to draw the connection between this process and that of artistic creation is evidenced by Miriam's observation directly after the Model's death. Looking over the precipice and seeing her tormentor's body below, she exclaims, "You have killed him, Donatello! He is quite dead . . . *stone dead*!" (135, emphasis mine). An artist's model no longer, Miriam's shadow is apotheosized (figuratively) into a stone figure, a statue that they all have had a hand in creating. Though she initially attributes the Model's death solely to Donatello, Miriam quickly amends her statement to acknowledge her own culpability, saying, "We two slew yonder wretch. The deed knots us together for time and eternity, like the coil of a serpent!" Given the preponderance of Biblical imagery in the text, it is tempting to read any mention of serpents as an allusion to the tempter in the Garden of Eden. Here, however, Hawthorne perhaps has another figure in mind, one with an extensive aesthetic pedigree: the statue of Laocoön and His Sons, which, like Praxiteles' Faun, is housed in the Vatican Museum. The subject of the famous debate between Winckelmann and Lessing, the ancient statue, unearthed in the

sixteenth-century, depicts the Trojan priest and his two sons being strangled by two sea-serpents sent as divine punishment for Laocoön's past actions.[142]

Hawthorne mentions the statue on a few occasions in his *French and Italian Note-Books*, one of these reflections being particularly pertinent to this discussion: "The Laocoön on this visit impressed me not less than before; it is such a type of human beings struggling with an inextricable trouble, and entangled in a complication which they cannot free themselves from by their own efforts, and out of which Heaven will not help them."[143] As is the case throughout *The Marble Faun*, this aesthetic observation from Hawthorne's notebook is picked up and developed in relation to the narrative, providing an image that encapsulates the complexities of a situation in which the characters are ensnared. Though not yet directly mentioned, the Laocoön haunts both Miriam's statement and the narrator's elaboration of the idea of complicity, the state in which Miriam and Donatello find themselves subsequent to the Model's death. Knotting them together "like the coil" of a snake,

> [t]heir deed—the crime which Donatello wrought, and Miriam accepted on the instant—had wreathed itself . . . like a serpent, in inextricable links about their souls, and drew them into one, by its terrible contractile power . . . So intimate, in those first moments, was the union, that it seemed as if their new sympathy annihilated all other ties . . . a new sphere, a special law, had been created for them alone. (135)

Up until this moment, Donatello has been "a simple and joyous creature" who seems to exist mostly for the contemplation of his artistic companions, a faun whose innocent sensuality recalls a lost state of being uncomplicated by questions of morality and judgment (134). His murder of Miriam's model makes him an artist in his own right; the crime which he has "wrought" "kindle[s] him into a man," and thus moves him

[142] Held up by Pliny as the epitome of visual artistry, the Laocoön has a long and pertinent history in aesthetic criticism, which I hope to pursue in greater depth later.
[143] Vol. 10: *French and Italian Notebooks* 132. In an alternate edition, this quotation ends differently, concluding "out of which Heaven alone can help them."

into "a new sphere" where his burgeoning rational faculties give him the capacity to think and act as a moral agent. This new sensibility manifests itself in the language he uses to characterize his killing of the Model; as he tells Miriam, "there was short time to weigh the matter; but he had his trial in that breath or two . . . and his sentence in that one glance, when your eyes responded to mine" (135). A curious commingling of the aesthetic and judicial registers, this notion of judgment being communicated not in a word but in a glance is indicative of way in which complicity lies outside the boundaries of easily determinable and definable categories of guilt and innocence. In two previous instances, Donatello had asked Miriam's permission to dispatch the Model, and in both cases, she had verbally denied that request.[144] In this instance, her assent is unspoken. The Model's trial, sentence, and execution occur in an instant, and this instant of non-verbal communication unites the pair in an "inextricable" bond whose hallmark is a terrible kind of intimacy, a "new" kind of sympathy that is rooted in a shared sense of responsibility for the deed which one "wrought" and the other "accepted."

The statue of the Laocoön, with the serpent twined about the limbs of three sufferers, would not be an applicable figure for complicity in *The Marble Faun* if the allusion extended only to Donatello and Miriam; for it to be fully realized, Hilda, the third participant in the scene, must also be involved. Thus, Hawthorne returns to the image in a later chapter, in which Hilda, having retreated horror-stricken from the scene without alerting her friends to her presence, grapples with her own loss of innocence and the moral implications of bearing witness to a crime:

[144] In the first instance, the Model comes upon Miriam and Donatello in the Borghese Gardens, and Donatello asks, "Shall I clutch him by the throat? Bid me do so; and we are rid of him forever" and Miriam responds, "In Heaven's name, no violence!" (71) In the second, the Model surprises them by the Trevi Fountain, and Donatello tells her to "Bid me drown him!" to which Miriam responds, "Peace, peace!" (114).

> A torpor . . . had possessed itself of the poor girl, like a half-dead serpent knotting its cold, inextricable wreaths around her limbs. It was that particular despair . . . which only the innocent can experience, although it possesses . . . the gloomy characteristics that mark a sense of guilt . . . It was that dismal certainty of the existence of evil in the world. (256)

That Hilda is twined in the same "inextricable wreaths" that have encircled Donatello and Miriam is indicative of the far-reaching and expansive nature of complicity (as opposed to outright guilt). While she herself has in no way contributed to the Model's death, her witnessing of it intimately connects her to those involved and connects her in ways perceptible both to her and to the outside world. On one level, Hilda's sense of complicity in the event burdens her with a sorrowful knowledge that transforms her previous mode of aesthetic apprehension. She loses "the gifted simplicity of vision" that made her such a brilliant copyist, the "eye of faith" that allowed her to see in the works of the Old Masters the ideal that they intended but never quite managed to execute (262, 261). Going to the galleries now, she sees "beauty less vividly, but fe[els] truth, or the lack of it, more profoundly." On another, her despair leaves a mark on her countenance that is visible to others, a despair that has all the same "characteristics" of "a sense of guilt." This outward change is first observed by Hilda herself, when she catches a glimpse of her own face in the mirror, as she sits in her room next to her copy of the Beatrice Cenci. Happening to "throw her eyes on the glass" and to take in "both of these images at one unpremeditated glance . . . [s]he fancied—nor was it without horror—that Beatrice's expression, seen aside and vanishing in a moment, had been depicted in her own face, likewise, and flitted from it as timorously" (160). Echoing Miriam's encounter with the picture, Hilda's face now also takes on the mysterious expression of the Cenci, and in the mirror's reflection of her face next to her own copy of the picture, we are given an image that represents Hilda's progression from one form of perceptual understanding to another. Her painted copy of the picture represents her earlier aesthetic sensibility—based largely

on a superficial accuracy of vision, a capacity for scrutinizing surfaces—and her facial expression reveals how the witnessing of Miriam and Donatello's crime has given her a deeper and more conflicted comprehension of what lies beneath those surfaces, the situations and responsive emotions that bring them into being. By virtue of having been involved (however tangentially, unintentionally, and unwillingly) in the scene on the precipice, she is now an "actress" in the same way Miriam was, a figure who embodies and projects a certain look and posture indicative of a drama in which she is a player.

Part of what characterizes Hawthorne's notion of complicity is the idea of endless proliferation. Rather like a contagion, complicity continually spreads outwards, affecting those who, through different means, come in contact with those already affected (and infected). Even Hilda becomes a "carrier" insofar as her copy of the Cenci (the one now graven on her face) is passed on in the public sphere, when she visits a gallery soon after the scene in her studio. As she stands before a painting in the gallery, a painting whose subject reminds her of Miriam, she is observed by a young Italian artist, who sketches her portrait and uses it as the basis for an original composition of a woman "gazing, with sad and earnest horror, at a blood-spot which she seemed just then to have discovered on her white robe" (258).[145] The picture is later made into an engraving from which copies are printed and made available "in the print-shops along the Corso," and it becomes an object of interest to "connoisseurs" who argue that "the idea of the face was supposed to have been suggested by the portrait of Beatrice Cenci" (258). So, the expression of Beatrice Cenci is transferred from the original painting to Hilda's copy to Hilda's face, then to a random spectator's sketchbook, then to his canvas, then to an engraving, and then to a series of copies

[145] The painting that Hilda is looking at is a painting of the Spanish Queen, Joanna of Aragon, a painting at that time attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. That this minor member of the intriguing and inbred Spanish royalty reminds Hilda of Miriam is yet another coded allusion to the possibility of incest in the relation between Miriam and her Model.

made from that engraving. The fact that this expression is still discernable in the eyes of practiced and refined viewers as suggestive of the painting from which it originated speaks to the indestructibility of the expression's essence, an essence that might be misinterpreted, but its outward look never mistaken. The Italian artist who records Hilda's expression in his painting "reads the mystery" of it rightly; he calls his picture "Innocence, dying of a Blood-Stain." But, as the narrator notes, this original title is changed when the painting is purchased by a picture-dealer, who, desiring to make the picture more "intelligible" to his audience, renames it "The Signorina's Vengeance." Taking what was a highly allegorical composition, meant to represent the anguish of Innocence when "a man is slain in her presence" and his blood stains her robe, and characterizing it as instead a "very natural representation of a not uncommon fact"—that of a passionate young woman having "stabbed her perfidious lover with a bodkin"—the picture-dealer denies the possibility of complicity, reducing the composition to, again, a well-worn tale of innocence falling prey to guilt (258). The narrator wearily acknowledges that this gross over-simplification of the art object's significance is all too typical, asserting, "thus coarsely does the world translate all finer griefs that meet its eye! It is more a coarse world than an unkind one." In this short imaginary history of a painting's elusive expression, Hawthorne demonstrates how the "fineness" of emotions and the specificities of occurrences are so often lost in perceptual translation, made "coarse" by the blunt and indiscriminate perspective of the average viewer. The picture-dealer, by appending to the picture of Hilda an inaccurate but more "intelligible" title, performs an act of aesthetic adjudication, an act that mystifies the complexities of truth by offering a familiar narrative in a traditional format. Like the painting of her, though, Hilda's situation—in which her gaze links her to an actual criminal act—cannot be reduced to a familiar narrative of guilt and innocence. Hawthorne suggests that those viewers capable of understanding

this more complex form of responsibility are also the ones who would resist the kind of simplifications of which the picture-dealer is guilty. Significantly, that class of viewers does not yet include Hilda herself, who looks horror-stricken at her own indirect involvement and despairs, like Lady Macbeth, that "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand," stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the mitigating circumstances that determine complicity.[146]

Perhaps because he is the only one of the main characters not to have participated in or witnessed the death of the Model, Kenyon most clearly articulates Hawthorne's notion of complicity. That Kenyon is a sculptor also makes him the most plausible candidate for making explicit the extended allusion to the Laocoön that has been used to explain the guilty and grief-filled bonds that link the friends in the wake of the murder. The Laocoön is finally directly mentioned in a scene towards the end of the text, after Kenyon has left Miriam and Donatello in Perugia and has returned to Rome to reunite with Hilda. Hilda having failed to meet him, as promised, at the Vatican Museum, he wanders the sculpture gallery by himself, lonely and isolated, finding only dissatisfaction in the great works of art that formerly defined his existence:

> In the chill of his disappointment, he suspected that it was a very cold art to which he had devoted himself . . . Nothing pleased him, unless it were the group of the Laocoön, which, in its immortal agony, impressed Kenyon as a type of the long, fierce struggle of Man, involved in the knotted entanglements of Errour and Evil, those two snakes, which (if no Divine help intervene) will be sure to strangle him and his children in the end . . . In the Laocoön, the horrour of a moment grew to be the Fate of interminable ages. (303-304)

[146] *Macbeth* V.i.20-21. Hawthorne alludes to this image of the "bloody hand" of complicity a few times in *The Marble Faun.* In the first instance, Hilda and Miriam witness Miriam meeting with the Model before a public fountain, and Miriam stoops before him and disguises her act of submission by pretending to wash her hands in the fountain (84-85). Later, the four friends, out on a evening walk with a group of artists, are surprised at the Trevi Fountain by the Model, who walks up behind Miriam and Donatello, adding his shadow to theirs, and he gestures to her, "inviting her to bathe her hands" (114). That Hilda, after witnessing Miriam and Donatello's crime, frequently imagines herself marked with blood carries the analogy further, expanding it as Hawthorne expands his notion of complicity.

Echoing, with a few important differences, the aforementioned passage from Hawthorne's journal, Kenyon's impression of the Laocoön transforms the author's earlier observations into a grand allegory of the human condition. What makes the statue, for Kenyon, "the one triumph of sculpture" is that it conveys "repose," the "essential" feature of the plastic arts, "in the very acme of effort" (304).[147] In other words, by taking the struggle of a moment and casting it in marble, the Laocoön displays a figure perpetually, even eternally, in agony. Forever suspended in this entangled posture, it comes to signify for Kenyon mankind likewise suspended in the "knotted entanglements of Errour and Evil," a struggle that is "the Fate of interminable ages" and, for the individual, ceases only with death. Kenyon's sensitivity to "the terrible magnificence, as well as to the sad moral of this work" speaks to his own growing sense of complicity, which manifests itself not as a feeling of grief or guilt, but rather as a more philosophical recognition of the complexity of the bonds that link individuals to each other and to the world more generally.

Originating in his own undeclared love for Hilda, a feeling that (in a very *Jane Eyre*-like fashion) is compared to "an exquisitely sensitive cord . . . knotted with his . . . heart-strings" and stretched between the "owl-tower" on which he stands and "Hilda's dove-cote," Kenyon's acceptance of complicity takes on a more definite form in his realization that Miriam and Donatello, guilty as they are, hold each other's sole means of salvation, a salvation rooted in the intimacy of the attachment they formed in the murder of the Model. When the pair meet again in Perugia, Kenyon takes on the role of officiant, overseeing a reunion that shares its outward form with a marriage ceremony. As the two stand before him with linked hands, he offers up his opinion that "as a bystander, though a deeply interested one," he might be able to "discern

[147] Hawthorne's insistence on the importance of sufficient "repose" in successful sculpture seems indebted to the Winckelmann/ Lessing debate, particularly the idea that beauty can only be communicated visually by softening the expression of certain emotions, of transfiguring them so that they inspire pity and sympathy in the viewer as opposed to fear or disgust.

somewhat of truth that is hidden from" them (250). That truth is that Miriam, in taking Donatello "out of a wild and happy state, . . . [has] incurred a responsibility," and that responsibility is to educate Donatello in the business of being mortal, which, in the context of this narrative, is synonymous with being moral. As Miriam "possesses what [Donatello] requires, and, with utter self-devotion, will use it for [his] good," Kenyon pronounces "the bond betwixt [them] . . . a true one, and never—except by Heaven's own act—be rent asunder" (251).

Yet this union differs from an ordinary marriage: a bond "twined with such black threads" as sin, guilt, and grief, it is not meant to facilitate "earthly happiness" but instead "it is for mutual support; it is for one another's final good; it is for effort, for sacrifice . . . for mutual elevation and encouragement towards a severe and painful life." And, Kenyon concludes, "if, out of toil, sacrifice, prayer, penitence, and earnest effort towards right things, there comes, at length, a sombre and thoughtful happiness, taste it, and thank Heaven" (252). Kenyon envisions the form and purpose of Miriam and Donatello's union in a way recalling the form and purpose of aesthetic experience. Essentially, he is arguing that Miriam, having awakened Donatello's conscience through a crime committed on her behalf, can use her "rich gifts of heart and mind, [her] suggestive power, [her] magnetic influence, [her] sympathetic knowledge" to help him move from an overwhelming despair at his own fallen state to a moderate but conflicted sort of happiness. Like the art object, her redemptive power lies in her ability to stimulate his intellectual and emotional faculties, to use her "rich gifts" to help him refine his own sensibilities and hone the "sympathetic knowledge" of the world that first emerged out of the crucible of "misfortune." The complicitous bond between the pair is thus redeemed by an emotion equally outside the realm of rational understanding and easy understanding: love. But, if the flip side of complicity is love, this incarnation of it bears little resemblance to the ecstatic avowals that decorate lyric

odes and Valentines. Instead, sharing with the sin and sorrow of complicity a certain furtiveness, the love between Miriam and Donatello is a private thing that cannot withstand direct scrutiny, even from the lovers themselves. As the narrator muses, "who can tell where happiness may come, or where, through an unexpected guest, it may never show its face? Perhaps—shy, subtle thing—it had crept into this sad marriage-bond, when the partners would have trembled at its presence, *as a crime*? (252, emphasis mine) A product of the same event by which they are forever guiltily linked, Miriam and Donatello's happiness in their "sad marriage-bond" is like the secret look of art objects; it can only be fleetingly apprehended by a sympathetic viewer, who "catch[es] a glimpse" of the object at just such an moment and angle that "all [its] hidden meaning [is temporarily] on the surface" (253). To the majority of onlookers, though, the significance of Miriam and Donatello's meeting in Perugia remains inscrutable; with the notable exception of Kenyon, the "thousand eye-witnesses" who are an audience to their symbolic marriage only "gaze[] so curiously at the unintelligible scene" and, in their innocence, fail to understand its import.

In Hawthorne's preface to *The Marble Faun*, he addresses himself to a particular kind of reader, a reader that he is no longer sure actually exists, an "unseen brother of the soul" capable of reading his work with the "apprehensive sympathy" that allows the author to leave certain identities ambiguous and certain mysteries unresolved. Judging by his decision to append an explanatory "postscript" to the second edition of the novel, he did not find many readers of this "mythic" breed. Still, if the postscript, teasingly and reluctantly, offers a few largely unsatisfying answers to more mundane questions, it also provides insight into what Hawthorne saw himself doing in *The Marble Faun* to the unique form of the romance that he had spent his career developing. As he tells this later generation of readers, with *The Marble Faun*

he had attempted to revise the romance genre by adding an aestheticizing narrative frame,

> throwing about this Romance the kind of atmosphere essential to the effect at which he aimed. He designed the story and the characters to bear, of course, a certain relation to human nature and human life, but still to be so artfully and airily removed from our mundane sphere, that some laws and proprieties of their own should be implicitly and insensibly acknowledged. (359)

As much a challenge as an explanation, this description gestures towards the function of the Roman spectacle in Hawthorne's text. Rome, as described in *Middlemarch*, is a city of "visible history," it art, its architecture, even its landscape all attesting to the rich diversity of competing styles, value systems, and beliefs that contributed to its construction. The visibility of this diversity is what provides the specific "kind of atmosphere" "essential to the effect at which [Hawthorne] aimed." The author might have substituted "affect" for "effect" here, as it is by focalizing so much of his story through the aesthetic experiences of his characters that he moves beyond the limited and limiting idea of a dualistic, wholly cohesive moral universe to a more expansive if sometimes frighteningly indeterminate model of social relations to which *The Marble Faun* ultimately ascribes. In the aesthetic frames provided by his characters' subjective impressions of various art objects, Hawthorne finds a means of channeling allegorical energies at work in the romance, concretizing and complicating them in the process. If the art objects that the characters study become the staging area for certain aesthetic and moral conflicts—between idealism and realism, good and evil—they nevertheless refuse simplistic resolutions to these conflicts and, instead, force their viewers to recognize how much of human experience lies beyond the comfortable boundaries of sanctioned "laws and proprieties." In *The Marble Faun*, aesthetic experience offers a pathway to a different way of knowing the world, a mode of comprehension that stems from an awareness of complicity, which is "a certain

relation to human nature and human life" that, like the art objects that allow Hawthorne's characters to see the complex bonds that make them responsible to and for one another, can only be "implicitly and insensibly acknowledged."

CHAPTER 6.

"As from the hand of a Great Master": "The Art of Culture" in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

Early Criticism and a Late Preface: James's Critical Framing of *The Portrait of a Lady*

From its title onwards, Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-81) encourages a reading that focuses on moments of aesthetic encounter. Certainly Victorian art culture and the fin-de-siècle aesthetes who were its cleverest and perhaps most willful children inspired this early novel in ways that have been thoroughly documented.[148] It is also a text that bears witness to its young author's burgeoning awareness of the novel as a unique artistic form, capable of conveying elements of human experience never so well captured in any other medium, and for this reason, the narrative representation of acts of perception therein is of a stamp and significance quite different from what is found in the novels and pieces of short fiction of Brontë, Eliot, Pater, and Hawthorne, all writers to whom James knew himself indebted. James himself addresses this matter in the 1908 Preface to his novel, but as illuminating as is the famous "house of fiction" section from that text to his novel, it is perhaps just as important to go backwards, to before James emerged as a novelist in his own right, when he was still making his name as a critic of the art that was to so profoundly influence his fiction.

In 1877, roughly three years before *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James reviewed an exhibition of artwork including paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones. Though James is quick to identify himself as a "spectator not at all in

[148] Two books that best exemplify this type of criticism are Adeline Tintner's *The Museum World of Henry James* (Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I. Research Press, 1986) and Viola Winner's *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1970).

sympathy with that school of art," one "not at all inclined to look at things after the morbidly ingenious fashion which seems . . . the sign of this school," he nevertheless praises Burne-Jones's canvasses in terms that presage the composition of his own *Portrait.* Asserting that Burne-Jones's "productions" can be enjoyed "only with a dozen abatements," James still argues that these artworks should be enjoyed, as they are characteristic of

> the art of culture, of reflection, of intellectual luxury, of aesthetic refinement, of people who look at the world and at life not directly, as it were, and in all its accidental reality, but in the reflection and ornamental portrait of it furnished by art itself in other manifestations; furnished by literature, by poetry, by history, by erudition.[149]

In this surprisingly generous assessment, James acknowledges that Pre-Raphaelite artistry—which, even today, is too often dismissed as navel-gazing and escapist—is itself a response to the culture it is helping to create. His account links the material and immaterial markers of aestheticism (for example, its heady intellectualism along with its penchant for sumptuousness) in a way that seems designed to evoke the complex social milieu out of which it emerged. This milieu, he further intimates, is the product of "people who look at the world" in a deliberate and particular fashion, choosing to see beyond its "accidental reality" to the patterns and pictures that can be structured out of the chaos. While he acknowledges Burne-Jones's stunning technical ability, James primarily values the painter for his artistic expression of this perspective. Not the direct gaze of a realist, Burne-Jones's perspective is that of the aesthete, heavily mediated, the world seen through various artistic frames and intellectual filters. For an audience schooled by Ruskin to see art *as* culture (serving the didactic function of acculturating the viewer), James here is asking them to recognize in Burne-Jones's paintings the art *of* culture. What is artful, so to speak, in

[149] Henry James, *Henry James: Essays on Art and Drama*, ed. Peter Rawlings (Aldershot, Hants, England: Scolar Press, 1996) 257.

Burne-Jones's art is its ability to pictorially suggest the perspective of the already cultured viewer, the individual most capable of appreciating it. Thus, in a weird way, James implies that what is to be enjoyed in Burne-Jones (and what can be enjoyed only by a select group) is the perspective of the viewer himself, as that perspective is reflected back at him by the art object.[150]

Of course, to appreciate an art object solely for its confirmation of one's cultural superiority smacks of intellectual onanism, and James is too savvy to ignore the chance to distinguish himself from those who would undertake or unabashedly celebrate such an enterprise. In addition to his cryptic mention of the "abatements" necessary to enjoy Burne-Jones, his review also makes a point of both praising and critiquing Burne-Jones for his reflectiveness, for the way in which his body of "work holds a perpetual revel of its own" to the degree that every artwork seems just another expression of the claustrophobic interior of the artist's imagination. James develops this idea perhaps most ingeniously through two allusions to Tennyson, the first of which is couched in the quotation above. Though James's description of Burne-Jones's perspective on the world as "in the reflection and ornamental portrait furnished by art itself" could be read as referencing one of the artist's paintings (*The Mirror of Venus*) on display at the Grosvenor Gallery exhibition he was reviewing, the strange double distancing from reality conveyed by James's pairing of the mirror (or "reflection") with the "ornamental frame" also evokes Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*. A poem now widely read as an allegory of the artist's relation to the public, it tells the story of a doomed Arthurian heroine who, owing to a curse, can only look at the world through her turret-window as that framed view is itself reflected in a mirror. What she sees in that mirror she weaves into beautiful tapestries, until the fateful day

[150] I use the masculine gender deliberately here, as I will later argue that in choosing a female protagonist in *Portrait* James is deliberately tinkering with the gendered aesthetic formulations he earlier endorsed.

that Lancelot rides by, causing her to look directly down on Camelot, setting into motion a series of events leading to her death.

The other allusion to Tennyson comes at the review's conclusion, when James asserts, "[i]n the palace of art there are many chambers, and that of which Mr. Burne-Jones holds the key is a wondrous museum. His imagination, his fertility of invention, his exquisiteness of work, his remarkable gifts as a colorist . . . all these things constitute a brilliant distinction." "The Palace of Art" is the title of another Tennyson poem, similarly involving a female protagonist—this time the beauty-loving "soul" of the speaker—who dwells within the "lordly pleasure-house" of the Imagination, until "loathing of her solitude," she leaves her palace for "a cottage in the vale," where she must do a form of penance for the solipsistic vanity of her previous mode of existence. Both of these poems imagine grim fates for those involved in artistic pursuits, but, more importantly, they also conceive of the mind of the artist as an enclosed space, a cabinet of curiosities filled with choice impressions taken from the outside world from which the individual is cut off. For all of Tennyson's ambivalence regarding the artistic process, these two poems leave unchallenged the aestheticist idea of the artist-figure as occupying a private, aristocratic, feminine sphere, far removed from the influences of public opinion and the marketplace. James, though, no sooner alludes to this idea than he begins to subtly unsettle it, first and foremost by referring to it in the midst of a magazine review. He reminds the reader that if Burne-Jones is, indeed, like the Lady of Shalott, weaving his magic sites at a double remove from the world, this aesthetic distance is itself the product of culture. And, if he dwells within the Palace of Art, he is not the chatelaine of the palace but rather the cicerone of one room, itself a museum of which his responsibility is to show the viewer a collection that has in some way been bought and paid for. James's review thus strives to complicate the notion of the art object as a direct pathway into the privileged interiority of the artist

by suggesting how that interiority is itself situated within a larger social structure, existing not just for itself but for the pleasure of its benefactors and the public whose lives it catches and reflects in its artistic productions.

Just as Tennyson's "lordly pleasure-house" seems a deliberate Victorian remodeling of the "stately-pleasure dome" of Coleridge's "Kubla-Khan," so the "house of fiction" of James's 1908 Preface might be read as an attempt to reconceptualize artistic perception in terms of architectural space. Juxtaposing these three structures, the metaphor steadily decreases in size and grandeur, perhaps affected by the loss of faith in the transformative powers of the imagination and in an increasing sense of distinction between the sister arts. What Coleridge envisions as a vast compound for an emperor is, by the time James gets to it, a house, and a crowded one at that:

> The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of an individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. The apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other . . . The spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form'; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his 'moral' reference.[151]

[151] Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Robert D. Bamberg, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995) 7. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

The Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* is one of the eighteen James wrote for the New York edition of his novels, and thus, this extended metaphor functions as part of a larger retrospective glance at his novel from the distance of roughly thirty years. That he invokes "the house of fiction" in relation to this particular novel gives the reader a better sense of just how the idea of "the portrait of a lady" influenced James's understanding of his own craft. As many critics have remarked, the title of this novel acts to frame the story and to establish a parallel between James's *Bildungsroman* and the art object. However, considering James's formative experiences as an art and drama critic, one can assume that he would not say *ut pictura poeisis* lightly or unselfconsciously. Millicent Bell has made the argument that "the title [*The Portrait of a Lady*] simply declares the novel's subject is an *effort* to achieve such a portrait, such a single view, and it asks to the last, 'Who is Isabel, what is she?'"[152] Bell's assessment astutely draws attention to the fundamental ambiguity and elusiveness attributed to Isabel's character by virtue of an indefinite article, but her interpretation of the "the" before "portrait" as simply an indicator of the desire of others to define her is problematic in a few respects. For one thing, it assumes that James is presupposing the failure of such aesthetic labors and that he is distinguishing his own project from the efforts of his characters, his narrators, even his reader. It also implies that the title is meant to be understood as semi-parodic, as a coy reference to the fallacy of those would-be aesthetes who would reduce Isabel to a character type—"a lady"—in their attempt to take her likeness. But another way of interpreting the title, especially the curious deployment of the definite and indefinite articles in *<u>The</u> Portrait of <u>a</u> Lady*, is to read it as James reminding the reader that all that we can know about "a lady" (or anyone else for that matter) is what can be gleaned from her adoption of or deviation from certain accepted forms. Although we are informed by the title that

[152] Millicent Bell, "Isabel Archer and the Affronting of Plot" in *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Robert D. Bamberg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995) 752.

we do not know the subject of the novel, it is intimated that we are somehow already familiar with the portrait itself, its narrative structure, its distinguishing features, perhaps even the identity of its creator. Thus, like aestheticism, this novel from the beginning presumes, but does not explicitly acknowledge, the existence of a like-minded reader, someone who is "in the know."

Also, looking again at James's description of the house of fiction, one notices a certain similarity between the image of the author as posted at a uniquely shaped window and that of a portrait. Both show the individual within the shaping and separating outline of a frame, the obvious difference being that the watcher at the window is looking out while the subject in a portrait is being looked at. But, perhaps it is precisely this difference that James is attempting to trouble, and, maybe, we can use the similarity between these two images to expand our understanding of the ambiguity in the novel's title. While, as Bell argues, James's novel is filled with characters trying to make sense of Isabel Archer, the novel's central preoccupation is Isabel as she attempts to make sense of things for herself. Though the subject of James's narrative portrait, Isabel is also a watcher at a window in her own right, whose wish "to look at life for [her]self" is the determining factor behind the many choices she makes and the consequences that come of them (475). Isabel is not an artist, nor is she distinguished by overtly aesthetic aspirations or sensibilities. Indeed, unlike James's earlier novels, *The Portrait of a Lady* is unique in featuring not one painter, sculptor, or copyist among its cast of characters.[153] Moreover, there is not a single extended meditation on an art object, such as one finds in *The Marble Faun* or *Middlemarch*. Yet, the story is still set amidst the art culture of late-nineteenth

[153] The one other exception to this is the short novel that James wrote just before *Portrait of a Lady*: *Washington Square*. Yet, that short text is so different from the novels of culture that preceded and followed it (and James himself, tellingly, left it out of the 1908 New York edition of his novels) that I think its existence does not lessen the point I am trying to make here. In *The Beaten Track* (Oxford UP 1993), Jim Buzard has also commented on the fact that James's early writings, such as the short story "The Travelling Companions" (1870), include extensive verbal representations of artworks.

century Europe, in private homes filled with ornaments, in museums, in churches, even in the excavated ruins at the center of Rome. James is scrupulous in identifying the paintings, prints, sculptures, enamels and china that his characters observe, covet, and collect, but, that said, the art object generally remains in the background, insofar as the representational space it affords is no longer the primary site for narrativizing the character's coming into consciousness. Thus, if James retreads ground made familiar by Brontë, Eliot, Pater, and, most obviously, Hawthorne, he is doing so with an important shift in focus: instead of structuring the aesthetic encounter around what the character *sees* (putting the art object at the center of moment), James instead emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of the character's *act of seeing.*

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James takes the idea of perspective as a frame and, out of the narrative representation of his title character's surveying of the "spreading field, the human scene," strives to create a portrait. However, he positions the reader so that rather than looking at a portrait of Isabel Archer, instead one sees out of "the aperture" created by "the need of [her] individual vision and by the pressure of [her] individual will" (7). This is different from making the narrative read as though it is the direct product of Isabel Archer's consciousness; even when focusing on Isabel's thoughts, the third-person narration does not provide the sense of intimacy conveyed by free indirect discourse. Instead, James strives to present his heroine's subjectivity—her perceptions, her ideas, her discoveries—as a subject worthy of aesthetic contemplation. In her voyage of self-discovery, which is punctuated by a series of encounters with individuals and objects, he attempts to formally represent the unique structure that is "her relation with herself" (9). As is evident from the 1908 preface, James sees his younger self as doing something quite radical in "the large building of *The Portrait of a Lady*," and the question we have to ask is how "the square and spacious house" of this novel helps James transition from the young

aesthete still preoccupied with the "palace of art" to the venerated author comfortably ensconced in the "house of fiction."

Although a degree of skepticism is always necessary when reading an author's evaluation of his or her own work, James's preface suggests that the narrative placement of his "vivid individual" in this text is a deliberate modification of the novel of aesthetic encounter. James insists that in his imagination Isabel Archer predated the narrative which was to frame her. Initially, she was "at large, not confined by the conditions . . . to which we look for much of the impress that constitutes an identity" (8). "Take[n] over straight from life," her "animated figure" first had

> *been* placed—placed in the imagination that detains it, preserves, protects, enjoys it, conscious of its presence in the dusky, crowded, heterogeneous back-shop of the mind very much as a wary dealer in precious odds and ends, competent to make an "advance" on rare objects confided to him, is conscious of the rare little "piece" left in deposit by the reduced mysterious lady of title or the speculative amateur, and which is already there to disclose its merit afresh as soon as a key shall have clicked in a cupboard-door. (8)

The mercantile analogy here is only one of several in the preface, and it again works to situate artistry (whether in a pictorial or verbal medium) within the consumer culture that validates its existence. That James here presents himself as not the creator or the owner but rather the "wary dealer," capable of noticing the merit in the "rare little 'piece,'" gestures back to his earlier claim that an artist is determined by that of which "he has *been* conscious." Artistry is, for James, a form of connoisseurship; it is the ability to appreciate the "value" of choice objects that their previous owners, for whatever reason, needed to convert into currency. James further specifies what kind of "dealer" he was by recalling his "pious desire to place [his] treasure right . . . resigned not to 'realise,' resigned to keeping the precious object locked up indefinitely rather than commit it, not matter at what price, to vulgar hands" (8). It is tempting to read this distinction as an implicit critique of those novelists who came before him,

whose desire to "realise" a quick return on their initial investment in art culture led them to put complex scenes of aesthetic experience in the service of conventional romantic plotlines. In any case, the placement of a "vivid individual" in anything but the most evocative of surroundings seems almost a breach of etiquette to which James opposes his own task as a novelist—to be a discriminating critic of what sorts of situations would set off that character to its best advantage.

What does it mean, though, to "place [his] treasure right," as James says? Again discussing his process in terms of space, James describes the "small corner-stone" of his story as "the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny" and the composition of the novel as a building "put up round my young woman while she stood there in perfect isolation" (8). Every other aspect of the text, then, is relegated to the status of building material, all utilized by James to create "a structure reared with an "architectural competence,'" at the "centre" of which is "the young woman's consciousness" (11). In *The Production of Space,* Henri Lefebvre argues that "(social) space is a (social) product," a product that emerges out of the dynamic exchange between three different relations to spatiality: "the perceived, the conceived, and the lived."[154] James, like Lefebvre, does not believe in the idea of the "space" of consciousness as truly separate from the world; for him, too, "(social) space is a (social) product," insofar as space is always produced out the individual's relation to the world. Also, as is clear from the preface, James conceives of narrative space as something that emerges out of his characters' negotiation of these different ways of relating to spatiality, of living in the world, conceiving of how they are to live in it, and of perceiving the life that surrounds them and in which they participate.

Additionally, that all space is, for James, social might help to explain all the talk of investments and returns, of values and rates of exchange, in the preface.

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[154] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 39-40.

Through these monetary metaphors, James emphasizes that all social experience is in some way determined by the market, not necessarily by money itself but rather by the dynamic of exchange which structures most forms of social interaction. Even the relation between the artist and the audience is figured in the preface as an economic transaction, with the "living wage" conferred on the artist being "the reader's grant of the least possible quantity of attention required for consciousness of a 'spell'" (13). The "occasional charming 'tip' is an act of [the reader's] intelligence over and beyond this," but this gratuity (like all gratuities) cannot be expected, as we do not live in "some Paradise (for art) where the direct appeal to the intelligence might be legalized." This later James no longer believes in the aestheticist "earthly paradise" of the Burne-Jones review, where the audience's aesthetic experience of the art object offers unmediated access into the museum-mind of the artist. Instead, the art object or novel is now figured as a site of exchange, a social space in which the artist must convince the viewer/reader of the value of his "rare piece" by his placement of it in a context that puts it properly on display. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James "places [his] treasure" by shifting the focus of his narrative from his heroine's "mild adventures" to "her sense of them, her sense *for* them," this shift facilitating "a mystic conversion by that sense, conversion into the stuff of drama or, even more delightful word, of 'story'" (14). It is thus Isabel's perspective, her sense of things, that becomes the stuff of fiction, and the "representation of her motionlessly *seeing*" offers the purest expression of her value as a Subject—not an object—of contemplation.

This shift in focus signals a more profound shift, one that is representative of a changing conception of the role of aesthetics in the novel. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James modifies the scene of aesthetic encounter to emphasize not the sociality of aesthetics but rather the aesthetics of sociality. In a novel like *The Marble Faun,* art objects function as symbols in a cultural code, allowing Hawthorne to communicate in

a kind of narrative short-hand, using his characters' perceptual performances in regards to suggestive paintings and sculptures to partially unveil hidden aspects of personalities, situations, and relations. In doing so, Hawthorne demystified what Kathy Psomiades has called the "central fiction of aestheticism": that art culture's "code is not a code, that it is actually the result of embodied impressions on the part of the cultivated observer."[155] *The Portrait of a Lady,* though, makes culture an art in itself, a complex web of social forms and values that, in special moments, can be evaluated *as though* it were a precious artifact. Whereas with Hawthorne and, to a lesser degree, with the other authors I've discussed, the scene of aesthetic encounter is made significant and revelatory *through the relation* of the character's perceiving consciousness to an art object with which a cultured reader would already be familiar (whether from first-hand experience or through the services of a Baedeker), James moves the art object into the background and allows the entire weight to rest on the slender shoulders of "an intelligent but presumptuous girl," making the scene part of a larger "ado" about the consciousness of Isabel Archer (8-9).

In the preface, James seems amazed at his own daring at attempting such a narrative feat, in crafting a story in which "this slight 'personality'" occupies the "center of interest." (Mis)quoting a line from Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*—that such slight female personalities are as "frail vessels" in which "is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affection"--James points out how infrequently Eliot's heroines are "suffered to be sole ministers" of the novel's appeal, instead "having their inadequacy eked out with comic relief and underplots" (9).[156] Though conveniently

[155] *Beauty's Body* 151.

[156] The quote is taken from the very end of Chapter XI: "What in the midst of that mighty drama are girls and their blind visions? They are the Yea or Nay of that good for which men are enduring and fighting. In these delicate vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affections." As Victoria Coulson points out in *Henry James, Women and Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), by changing Eliot's "delicate vessels" into "frail vessels," James stresses their potential break-ability over their delicacy of organization, effectively recasting them as "fragile containers of significance whose vulnerability heightens their meaningfulness" (115).

overlooking the fact that Eliot made this statement as part of a larger critique of how women are made the symbols for whatever particular "good" in which a culture is invested, his observation nevertheless highlights how he distinguishes his own novel from its forebears. While *The Portrait of a Lady* is also a text that emerges out of the art culture of the nineteenth-century, his decision to relegate that culture to the status of scenery announces an intention to somehow detach his heroine from the aesthetic economy of signs, an economy whose major form of currency is the female body. That is not to say, though, that Isabel Archer, within the scope of the narrative, is not to be looked at. She is the object of great attention for almost all the other (mostly male) characters in the novel. But, James largely resists the temptation to focalize the narrative through their eyes or their consciousnesses. What they see when they look at Isabel remains fundamentally unexplored, and absent from the novel are those moments in which the proximity of the heroine's body to an art object offers a witness the means of *reading into* Isabel a meaning that is dependent on this relation.

If we take James's modification of the aesthetic encounter in *The Portrait of a Lady* to be not anomalous but representative of some larger cultural movement, some thought needs to be given to the reasons the author might have felt this change necessary. James Buzard in *The Beaten Track* posits that as the European tour became more and more a bourgeois rite-of-passage—one that must be commemorated by the bringing home of "relics"—the "experiences garnered through tourism are moulded in the cultural marketplace into 'marketable' forms (the reified forms of souvenir or memorable captured experience in journal entry, letter, sketch or photograph)."[157] Increasingly recognized as a means of affirming one's status "in the sign-market of personal acculturation," the aesthetic valuation of the art object becomes "a form of acquisition rather than sympathetic understanding" and, thus, is bound up with the

[157] James Buzard, *The Beaten Track*: *European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture*, 1800-1918 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 9.

system of social and economic relations it is supposed to transcend.[158] James's reluctance to organize pivotal moments in the narrative around specific artworks can also be partially explained as a reaction against another consequence of the late-Victorian "Aesthetic Craze": the potentially endless proliferation of objects and scenes of admiration. As Jonah Siegel has pointed out in his writings on two of James's near contemporaries, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, Rome in the late-nineteenth century was seen as a veritable "museum of culture," in which every space was weighted with symbolical significance and every fountain and paperweight in the shape of Michelangelo's David offered the opportunity for rapturous contemplation. With the sheer excess of materials always threatening to overwhelm the senses, the aesthete frequently turned his or her attention to smaller, containable symbolic spaces, the "fragment" or the "outline."[159]

Although James's frequently ambivalent attitude towards Pater and often hostile attitude towards Wilde require caution in comparing their works, the Paterian "outline" does find an echo in James's fiction in the form of the "frame." Jonathan Freedman has noted that James shares with Pater "a supple alertness to the 'sensations' created by . . . artworks [and] to the viewer's alertly contemplative response."[160] However, Pater and James share more than a "supple awareness" of the sensations created in viewers by artworks. Their respective literary endeavors—especially Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* and James's *The Portrait of a Lady*—both attempt to recuperate the meaning and the value, the authenticity, of the aesthetic encounter by focusing on the immediate "impression" made in the mind of the especially receptive viewer. Faced with the twin perils of inundation (the

[158] Buzard 218, 223.
[159] Jonah Siegel, *Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth-Century Culture of Art* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 232, 227.
[160] Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990) 134.

superabundance of art objects) and inculcation (the socially prescripted response towards the art object), James, in particular, responds by drawing attention away from the content of the perceived image to the frame of the perceiving consciousness. He strips away the vast intertextual and interpictorial framework on which earlier novelists relied, revealing the social context in which that framework is situated. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, in doing so, he exchanges one symbolic economy for another, substituting concatenations of gestures in aestheticized social spaces for a network of real and imaginary art images. In other words, for James, the frame for the art object does not end at the periphery of the painting but includes the entire scene of viewing. In the "museum world" of *The Portrait of a Lady*, the narrative emphasis on how its heroine processes visual information transforms many otherwise unremarkable incidents into *tableaux vivants* in which even seemingly unimportant gestures and poses have a certain symbolic heft.

Lefebvre has argued that in "sensory space"—which is "real" space as it is experienced by the perceiving subjectivity—the "gestural systems," the "ritualized and codified gestures" "specific to a particular society" are capable of being recognized and decoded.[161] Given that the men and women James wrote about are, like him, products of nineteenth-century art culture, it follows that the gestural systems they employ would be both subtle and elaborate. In the same way that the highly-stylized interiors and picturesque exteriors they inhabit all seem designed with a particular dramatic "effect" in mind, James invests his characters' postures and actions with a certain self-consciousness that suggests the influence of an aesthetic education in the significance of forms. Ultimately, though, he is less interested in deciphering this social code than he is in revealing its intricacy and weird beauty, showing it off like an

[161] *The Production of Space* 210, 212, 213.

aesthetic object as it is framed by the receptive and appreciative consciousness of his heroine.

In an 1865 review of Harriet Prescott's novel *Azarian*, James concludes a critique of the author's preoccupation with "external signs and accidents of passion" with the pronouncement that "in the novel we crave the spectacle of that of which we may feel that we *know* it."[162] This comment helps to explain the complex relations between the author, characters, and reader that he sets up in the preface, where he repeatedly describes his characters as actors, himself as the beleaguered playwright, and the reader as part of a generally inattentive audience. The task of the author, for James, is more than the presentation of a story to the reader. The author must stage for the reader a "spectacle," a spectacle "of that of which we may feel that we know it." What the reader *knows* is the province of the realist novel: a familiar social setting, a particular value system, a stable of recognizable personalities. What the reader "*may feel* that [he or she] knows" is more elusive. It seems to refer to a mode of apprehension not strictly limited to objective knowledge of the world but rather to a subjective way of knowing that develops out of a feeling or sensation that the reader associates with a specific type of experience. In James's formulation, the reader, through a process of impressionistic identification, comes to recognize in the "fictive picture" something with which he or she is already familiar. However, this familiarity—much like the familiarity assumed by the title *The Portrait of a Lady*—is potential, a truth that the reader would be capable of discerning only when it is carefully crafted as a spectacle. It is Isabel Archer's "sense of [and] for things" that converts her adventures into a drama of spectatorship, in which Isabel is both an actress and a viewer. Her increasingly complex understanding of how to look at and what to look for in those social encounters that are pivotal moments in the narrative is

[162] Henry James. *Notes and Reviews.* ed. Pierre Chaignon Rose (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1968) 22. The review originally was published in the *North American Review*, January 1865.

the shaping force that "aestheticizes" those moments, presenting them to the reader (pre)arranged and exhibited for public consumption.

In his study of nineteenth-century conceptions of visuality, Jonathan Crary defends his decision to use the term "observer" instead of "spectator" with the claim that "spectator" "carries specific connotations, especially in the context of nineteenth-century culture, that [he] prefer[s] to avoid—namely, of one who is a passive onlooker at a spectacle, as at an art gallery or theater."[163] While there is some merit to this assertion, I would argue that it is specifically the idea of the spectator's supposed "passivity" that *The Portrait of a Lady* intends to complicate. Of course, to view as a spectacle a scene in which one is involved is to distance oneself from the moment by questioning the relation of self to scene and of temporal and spatial contingencies to the event. But, as the novel and the preface continually suggest, this process of dissociation is an action in itself, one with aesthetic as well as social implications. For James, the experience of the spectacle is (or should be) one in which the viewer plays the role of both a passive and an active observer, where the spectacle both acts upon the viewer and is itself reified by the viewer as she distances herself from it. One of the peculiar charms of James's novel is the way in which the major "doings" of Isabel Archer's life—her marriage, the birth and death of her child, her decision to return to her husband—all happen off-stage, outside of the narrative purview. The reason for this, James tells us in the preface, is that by focusing on what are conventionally understood to be the defining events in a woman's life, the author is not really "doing" the character; rather, one is doing "her relation to those surrounding her" (10). Only by organizing the narrative around those moments in which the heroine comes to define and to continually redefine "her relation to herself" can the author be said to be "really 'doing' her" (11). Only when Isabel is capable of looking at her life and her

[163] *Techniques of the Observer* 5.

relation to those around her with an aesthetic detachment akin to that associated with the viewing of art objects is she capable of seeing her life as a series of exchanges, of understanding hohe has used others and how she has been used by them.

James isolates two particular passages in his novel as exemplary of the "rare chemistry" by which the narrative treatment of his heroine's "sense" of things converts the seemingly quotidian into the quintessence of the significant: the first, an early encounter in which Isabel first lays eyes on the mysterious Madame Merle and, the second, an "extraordinary meditative vigil . . . of searching criticism" in which Isabel "sits up, by her dying fire, far into the night" reflecting on a strange scene she has just witnessed (14). This latter passage—a "representation simply of [Isabel] motionlessly *seeing*"—James deems "obviously the best thing in the book," "designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture" (15, 14). Both of these narrative moments show a solitary Isabel in the midst of an act of "mere still lucidity" and what makes these moments, in James's opinion, "as 'interesting' as the [conventionally Romantic] surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate" is that they represent "one of the identifications dear to the novelist, and even indispensable to him" (15). Perhaps not surprisingly, James does not clearly identify the identification so dear to him; however, given that in both of these instances Isabel is presented with a tableau that causes her to recognize how each person with whom she has come in contact has or will "exert some momentous influence on her life," one might assume that James is referring to the identification of the social obligations and constraints constantly shaping the individual's experience of the world (151). That one is only capable of identifying sociality when it is represented spatially, as a scene, and that the moment of reflection that this scene inspires is itself presented to the reader as a kind of narrative painting, one with "all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture," suggests that James sees the recognition of interpersonal

dynamics as something that is intrinsically "viewable," capable of being brought to the attention of the viewer and the reader only in the form of an aesthetic object. More generally, it also speaks to James's reconstruction of the aesthetic encounter in his novel, especially his use of the framing perspective of his heroine (at once a window and a blank canvas) to expose the network of exchange undergirding a particular cultural milieu. Looking at the two aforementioned passages as well as a few others that are similarly emblematic of James's exploration of the aesthetics of sociality, the remainder of this chapter will show how *The Portrait of a Lady* uses what James in his Preface calls the "international light" of nineteenth-century art culture (as it is experienced by Isabel Archer) as a background against which the unfolding drama of human relations takes place.

"Looking at the Truth Together": The Aesthetic Framing of the Social in James's *Portrait*

In a similar fashion to how the preface explains James's conceptualizing of his story—as building a structure around his "young lady"—the novel opens by laying out a scene for Isabel Archer to observe. This introductory setting is the lawn of an English country home, Gardencourt, which belongs to Isabel's American banker uncle, Daniel Touchett, and, as its name implies, it is a space in which a rich and natural exterior is enclosed within an artificially-imposed set of borders. It is described as a place in which "privacy . . . reigned supreme, and the wide carpet of turf that covered the level hill-top seemed but the extension of a luxurious interior" (18). The sense of interiority attached to Gardencourt's grounds is the same thing that gives to the various drawing rooms and salons detailed in the novel the feeling of public spaces: all have been, to some degree, crafted with a particular effect in mind. The conscious effort of making a place *seem* a certain way makes that place an

"extension" of the mind of its owner, but, at the same time, it is also an act of subterfuge. The space becomes a reflection of how the owner wishes to be seen, not how the owner really is. The "privacy" that "reigns" in Gardencourt, therefore, wears a public face; it is a surface that is intended for visual consumption or, in more rarified terms, aesthetic contemplation.

That this scene is the first that Isabel encounters in the novel signals James's intention to focus his narrative on what his heroine is capable of apprehending. Rather than beginning with the narrative frame on Isabel, here it is Isabel who rather unexpectedly enters in on a scene which the narrator has taken some pains to fully describe. Making "her appearance in an ample doorway," she is the epitome of James's watcher at the window, the frame of the doorway providing the vantage point from which she takes in the view "for some moments," while unnoticed by the persons on the lawn (25). Even when approached by her cousin, Ralph Touchett, her attention remains fixed on the picture created by the setting: "[s]he was looking at everything, with an eye that denoted clear perception—at her companion, at the two dogs, at the two gentlemen under the trees, at the beautiful scene that surrounded her" (26). Isabel approaches this moment from an aesthetic, rather than social, angle, as can be determined from her conversation with Ralph. Though she is in a new place, meeting new people, the encounter is largely interesting to her because of how everything looks. She exclaims that she has "never seen anything so lovely as this place" and, when informed that the younger of the two other gentlemen is a Lord Warburton (soon to join the ranks of her fervent admirers), she says, "Oh, I hoped there would be a lord; it's just like a novel!" (27). Isabel's "clear perception" is thus marked by her tendency to assess the reality of a situation in relation to certain preconceived aesthetic models. The lovely lawn of an English country home being decorated with a member of the

British nobility strikes Isabel as appropriately picturesque, "like a novel" in the (overly) fortuitous coming together of contingencies.

James reinforces his heroine's aptitude for appreciating such moments of aesthetic fitness only a few paragraphs later, again stressing the broad and far-reaching nature of her gaze:

> She had been looking all round her again . . . and while engaged in this survey she had made room in it for her companions; a comprehensiveness of observation easily conceivable on the part of a young woman who was evidently both intelligent and excited. She had seated herself . . . her head was erect, her eye lighted, her flexible figure turned itself easily this way and that, in sympathy with the alertness with which she evidently caught impressions. Her impressions were numerous, and they were all reflected in a clear, still smile. (28)

There is something quite Paterian about this description of Isabel catching "impressions," particularly in the dynamic between the rapidity with which those impressions flicker across her consciousness and how those myriad impressions all manage to be "reflected in a clear, still smile." One is reminded of Pater's Conclusion to *The Renaissance,* in which he compares the relation between "physical life" and "the inward world of thought and feeling" to that of the shoreline and center of a river, the former a place "where the water flows down indeed, though in apparent rest" and the latter "the race of the mid-stream, a drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought."[164] Though Pater is not concerned with how one's "physical life" looks to an outside observer, his analogy does offer a means of understanding a point central to James's narrativizing of aesthetic experience. If, as James suggests, Isabel's "comprehensiveness of observation" makes this moment for her an absolute deluge of sensory impressions, the richness and diversity of her reflections make little of an outward show. Isabel Archer is not meant to be interesting on the surface; it is in how

[164] *The Renaissance* 187.

that "still, calm" surface shows the smallest of ripples that indicates the quick flow of thoughts beneath. Like Gardencourt, which to her seems "a picture made real," Isabel herself is also a space characterized by "the sense of well-ordered privacy in the centre of a 'property'" (57). Her physical person, to a certain degree, is a property up for grabs; she can be "taken up" by her aunt Lydia Touchett, put on display by her cousin Ralph, married off to any one of her admirers.[165] Yet, it is in the "well-ordered privacy" of her consciousness, what Pater calls "the narrow chamber of the individual mind," that James finds a mystery worthy of narrative scrutiny.

That being said, the fact that Isabel Archer is still a saleable and highly covered commodity is a crucial feature of the story of aesthetic awakening that James has set out to tell. For, if she begins the novel an intriguing mystery, even to herself, it is in how the other characters attempt to place her that the "privacy" of her consciousness is to be narratively breached, largely in those moments of reflection when she is forced to recognize how she exists in relation to others. Early on, the narrator observes that Isabel is an alluring "combination of the delicate, desultory, flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions" (54). If the first part of this description is, again, rather Paterian, it is telling that her "hard, gem-like flame" is both fed and tempered by an especial responsiveness to outside circumstances, the determining characteristics of the social milieu in which she moves. Ralph Touchett recognizes this aspect of her personality almost immediately, and pronounces the chance to see "a real little passionate force . . . at play . . . the finest thing in nature." Continuing his internal monologue, he calls the sight provided by this "force . . . at play" in the world

[165] And, it is worth mentioning, all of these things do happen. Isabel is "adopted" by Lydia Touchett, who is the one who brings her to England upon her father's death; she is then put on display when Ralph has his father will her part of his fortune, merely so that Ralph himself has the pleasure of watching what she does with her life; and she is finally married off to Gilbert Osmond through the machinations of Madame Merle, who desires for Osmond and for her illegitimate daughter with Osmond, Pansy, wealth and the social status that comes with it.

> finer than the finest work of art—than a Greek bas-relief, than a great Titian, than a Gothic cathedral. It's very pleasant to be so well treated where one had least looked for it . . . Suddenly I receive a Titian, by the post, to hang on my wall—a Greek bas-relief to stick over my chimney-piece. The key to a beautiful edifice is thrust into my hand, and I'm told to walk in and admire. (63)

For the consumptive Ralph, to whom more active forms of pleasure have been denied, the opportunity to watch Isabel transforms his compulsory role of observer into the privileged position of aesthete. But, in his formulation, it is not Isabel's physical beauty (though considerable) that merits her a work of art; that would suggest she is merely a lovely object. It is "what was she going to do with herself" that intrigues him, mostly because, he notes, with most women "one had no occasion to ask" that question: "[m]ost women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come and furnish them with a destiny" (64). Isabel, though, "gave one the impression of having intentions of her own," making the study of her character less an assessment based on certain accepted standards of judgment and more a discernment of the causes behind her particular effect. Isabel promises Ralph the chance to exert more active mode of viewership, the challenge of understanding an artwork that strives to create itself.

Ralph's withering dismissal of the "gracefully passive" postures that "most women" adopt for the benefit of a society that objectifies them might be meant to suggest that the character, like the author, is more enlightened when it comes to the inequalities in gender roles and in the gendering of the aesthetic relation. However, when Ralph ponders Isabel, he still figures his observation as a form of ownership; she is a Titian to hang on *his* wall, a bas-relief over *his* mantelpiece, a building the key to which has been thrust in *his* hand. For all the pleasure he takes in the idea of her deciding her own destiny, he nevertheless imagines that destiny as a kind of visual spectacle which he is somehow entitled to view. While he gives Isabel leave to

"furnish" the building of her life with her own sense of purpose, his desire to purchase the structure so that he might "walk in and admire" it whenever he pleases betrays a proprietary instinct not wholly in keeping with his stance of aesthetic detachment. The inconsistencies in Ralph's position are further emphasized when the narrator pronounces "the sentiment of these reflexions . . . very just" but questions whether it is "exactly true that Ralph Touchett had had a key put into his hand" (63). Though agreeing with Ralph's assessment that Isabel "would take . . . a good deal of knowing," the narrator throws into doubt whether Ralph himself is capable of the depth of perception he seeks. Ralph's "attitude with regard to" Isabel is declared to be "contemplative and critical [but] . . . not judicial," the point being, presumably, that in spite of the thoughtful attention with which he regards her, he lacks the true impartiality necessary to really *know* her. Continuing the spatial metaphor, Ralph is described as having "surveyed the edifice from the outside and admired it greatly" and having "looked in at the windows and received an impression of proportions equally fair"; so far, however, he has only seen "glimpses and . . . ha[s] not yet stood underneath its roof" (64). Not a watcher at a window, Ralph is a watcher of windows; viewing the exterior structure of Isabel's public persona, he looks for unguarded moments in which he might see the private self that lives within it. That there is something intrusive, even uncomfortably voyeuristic, in his efforts is conveyed by this image of Ralph as a sort of Peeping Tom hoping to catch Isabel in some form of psychic undress. That said, it is not an erotic charge that Ralph seeks in these attempts. It is more the intellectual thrill that one gets from glimpsing something that the observed person wishes to keep hidden, the thrill of being, privately, in the know.

Yet, as James makes clear from the novel's beginning, there is always a price to be paid for knowledge, and as there is no character in *The Portrait of a Lady* who wishes to be in the know more than Isabel Archer, one of the primary sources of

interest is the question of what she is willing to give up in "her determination to see, to try, to know" the world (54). In two early scenes, Isabel's "great passion for knowledge" is put on display against the picturesque backdrop of an "oaken gallery" hung with paintings at Gardencourt (50). The viewing of art in both cases serves as the pretext for a broader meditation on the art of viewership, specifically as a means of knowledge-gathering different from the kind derived from experience. Ralph brings Isabel to the private picture gallery her first evening at the estate. The lighting at that time is "insufficient to show the pictures to advantage," but it does transform the gallery itself into a version of the luxurious palace of art described in the Burne-Jones review: "it fell upon the vague squares of rich color and on the faded gilding of the heavy frames; it made a sheen on the polished floor" (50). With the paintings reduced to "vague squares" in the low light, their richness of color blends into the gold gilding of the frames and the jewel-like polish of the floors to create an atmospheric space redolent of wealth and culture. Set off against this background, Isabel uses a candle to illuminate those paintings she wants to observe closely, and, rather than following her gaze, Ralph finds "himself pausing in the middle of the place and bending his eyes much less upon the pictures than on her presence." Adds the narrator, "[h]e lost nothing, in truth, by these wandering glances, for she was better worth looking at than most works of art" (50).

In spite of the compositionality of this moment, which seems perfectly crafted to set up an aesthetic encounter on par with the one involving Will Ladislaw and Dorothea Brooke in the Vatican museum in Eliot's *Middlemarch,* this scene does not develop into a comparative evaluation of Isabel and the painting she observes. The narrative insight given into Ralph's appreciation of Isabel in a posture of intense concentration remains markedly general, and no hint is given regarding the substance of the images which have captured her attention. The artworks in the gallery are not

identified, nor is the substance of Isabel's reverie mentioned. Instead, the moment finishes with Isabel simply remarking, "Well, now I know more than I did when I began!" (50) That the knowledge Isabel has gained from these pictures is not elucidated, to her cousin or to the reader, is the culmination of a series of narrative evasions that characterize James's reformation of the aesthetic encounter. Instead of a moment of revelation, in which the characters' proximity to art objects facilitates an exposure of some secret or unconscious motivation (usually through the recognition of a similarity between art object and viewer), here we have a reaffirmation of privacy. The art objects remain deliberately out-of-focus, and in the place of Isabel and Ralph's impressions of these paintings and each other, the scene itself leaves an impression that is all the more suggestive for being vague. With the aesthetically appealing scene of the gallery stimulating the visual faculties of his characters, James creates a picture of his characters looking, and in their respective relations to the objects on display, he plots out spatially the relation between them. Isabel looks both ardently and curiously at things she has never seen before, and the cultured and cynical Ralph, for whom the world has long since ceased to be an interesting puzzle, attempts to recapture a sense of interest and novelty by witnessing her encounters.

In this quick narrative snapshot, the reader is given a glimpse of the interpersonal dynamics of Isabel and Ralph that will determine the events that are to follow. It is Ralph's vicarious pleasure in watching Isabel watch that will soon motivate him to encourage his dying father to leave Isabel half of his own inheritance, a decision based almost entirely on his desire to "see her going before the breeze" of new and exciting experiences. His father chides him for thinking of Isabel's future life as though "it were for [his] own amusement" and goes on to remark, "[y]oung men are very different from what I was . . . [w]hen I cared for a girl—when I was young—I wanted to do more than look at her" (161). This observation speaks to more than a

difference between the two Touchetts; arguably, it also points to a generation gap created by nineteenth-century art culture. Mr. Touchett, the staunch old American banker, in his "want of imagination and of what is called the historical consciousness" is part of an earlier era that James characterizes as both robustly active and somewhat unrefined, and he has remained untouched by the cultural preoccupation with perception and cultivation that emerged with the Aesthetic Movement. Ralph, though, the product of Harvard and Oxford, has been shaped by the "modern criticism" (e.g. *The Renaissance*) that swept those institutions, and James describes the result as a man whose "outward conformity to the manners that surrounded him was none the less the mask of a mind that greatly enjoyed its independence, on which nothing long imposed itself, and which, naturally inclined to adventure and irony, indulged in a boundless liberty of appreciation" (43-44). In most respects, this portrayal of Ralph seems intended to identify him as a disciple of Paterian aestheticism, as a cultured and courtly, impressionistic and ironic, historicist and relativist seeker after exquisite moments. This association is only strengthened by recalling James's famously ambiguous eulogy of Pater as "a mask without a face."[166] That Ralph, underneath the guise of polite sociability, is similarly "without a face" might be straining the comparison a bit, but I would argue that what James meant in his assessment of Pater is not that there is nothing under the mask but rather that there is no essential self that is hiding behind it. Usually, to describe someone as wearing a mask is to accuse them of duplicity; it is to suggest that there is some real or authentic personality behind an outer façade that is deliberately kept concealed, potentially for nefarious reasons. Yet, in Ralph's case, behind the mask of the worldly-wise gentleman, there is a mind "on which nothing long imposed itself," one focused not on any specific desire or purpose, only on restlessly searching for new impressions. Like the young men of Pater's

[166] Henry James. "To Edmund Gosse," [13 December 1894], *Letters [of] Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, vol. 3: 1883-1895 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1980) 492.

Imaginary Portraits, what deprives (if it is a deprivation) Ralph of a stable, unchanging face behind his mask is the overwhelming awareness of his own imminent death. His illness forcing him "to give up the idea of distinguishing himself" in the world, he commits himself solely to the task of distinguishing *for* himself its many objects of interest, to spending "the interval [he has left] as agreeably" as he can through aesthetic experience (46). It is Ralph's "sacrifice" of all other forms of activity that sharpens his perception, giving him an unusual insight into the possible pleasures of viewership. In the words of the narrator, "with the prospect of losing them the simple use of his faculties became an exquisite pleasure; it seemed to him the joys of contemplation had never been sounded" (46).

Still, this depth of visual understanding comes at a steep cost, a fact which Ralph attempts to communicate to Isabel at the conclusion of their visit to the picture gallery. After she finishes viewing the paintings, she asks him about another visual spectacle that she hopes Gardencourt will show her. She questions him as to whether the estate, like all romantically-situated country homes, has "a ghost . . . a castle-spectre, a thing that appears" (50). Though Ralph gently rebukes this fancy, when she presses him "to show [her] the ghost," he replies, "I might show it to you, but you'd never see it . . . [y]ou must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have some miserable knowledge" (51-52). Only "[i]n that way," he continues, "your eyes are opened to it. I saw it long ago" (52). Isabel's desire for a ghost takes us back to an earlier observation that she made, when she described the presence of Lord Warburton at Gardencourt as "just like a novel" (27). Here, too, she betrays a tendency to categorize her experiences in terms of established narrative models, in this case, that of the gothic romance. Ghosts, as manifestations of the past intruding on the present, are part of what Peter Brooks has called the gothic novel's "epistemology of depths": "it is fascinated by what lies hidden in the dungeon and the sepulcher. It sounds the

depths, bringing to violent light and enactment the forces hidden and trapped there."[167] Isabel comes to Europe with the same sort of fascination, seeking an education in the old world's "epistemology of depths," but, though James shares with his heroine an interest in gothic trappings, the dungeons and sepulchers that are the privileged sites of the gothic have been relocated in his novel from the exterior location of the setting to the interior space of consciousness.

Isabel and Ralph's elliptical discussion in the gallery announces this repositioning of the gothic through a series of subtle clues, the first being Isabel's description of the ghost as a "castle-spectre, a thing that appears." As William Veeder has pointed out, *The Castle Spectre* (1797) was the title of a popular dramatic romance by Matthew "Monk" Lewis.[168] Set in medieval Wales, this gothic tale of innocence threatened has for its villain a seductive but murderous aristocrat named Lord Osmond. That James had Lewis's romance in mind when he decided on "Gilbert Osmond" for Isabel's future husband seems likely, given his penchant for gothic mysteries as well as his early apprenticeship as a drama critic. Yet, if Lord Osmond is indeed the model for Isabel's dangerously refined spouse, James's buried allusion to the play in this early scene, before Gilbert Osmond even enters into the story, suggests that James introduces "the spectre" of the gothic novel into his own text as much to distinguish it from this earlier narrative form as to announce its continuity with it. James's review of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* usefully articulates James's attitude towards the fictional genre that bridges the space between the spectacle of the gothic romance and his novel of aesthetic spectacle: the sensation novel. Especially popular in the three decades preceding James's *Portrait*, the sensation novel borrowed heavily from the gothic tradition, offering elaborately plotted tales of incest, bigamy,

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[167] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976) 19.
[168] William Veeder, *Henry James: Lessons of the Master: Popular Fiction and Personal Style in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) 120-121.

and murder (to name only a few of its favorite vices). Mostly, though, the sensation novel dispensed with the supernatural machinery of the gothic romance, and its typical setting was far removed from the Swiss chateaus and Italian prisons common to those earlier literary productions, favoring instead more modern and domestic locations. James praises Collins for this innovation, arguing that to

> Mr. Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors . . . Less delicately terrible, perhaps than the vagaries of departed spirits, but to the full as interesting, as the modern reader understands the word, are the numberless possible forms of human malignity . . . Of course, the nearer the criminal and the detective are brought home to the reader, the more lively his "sensation."[169]

To borrow James's pun, the sensation novel "brings home" the mystery, making it a private matter, something that unfolds largely behind closed doors. The "sensations" these stories provoke in the reader are all the more "lively," James intimates, because they are more familiar; their interest has to do with the way in which they present social relations as a web of malignant motivations and pernicious plottings. As James says later in the review, the sensation novel reminds us that "society" is "a vast magazine of crime and suffering, of enormities, mysteries, and miseries of every description, of incidents, in a world."[170] The sensation novel banishes the literal ghosts of its gothic predecessors, but in its continued interest in the ways in which the present of its characters is constantly being shaped by the actions of the past, it remains a haunted genre. The main difference is that the function of gothic ghost—to bring to light the sinning and scheming of the villains—is now taken over by the detective.

Though James's *The Portrait of a Lady* shares with Collins's *The Woman in White* a concern with "the mysteries which are at our own doors," the doors in his

[169] *Notes and Reviews* 110.
[170] *Notes and Reviews* 114.

novel are mostly of the figurative variety, leading into the structures of his characters' minds. And while the "numberless forms of human malignity" feature prominently in his novel, James shifts the focus from actions to effects. The "interest" for James's "modern reader" is to be found not in the wrongs perpetrated by the novel's villains (if such romantic creatures are still to be found in their undiluted glory) but rather in how an awareness of evil and cruelty in the world and the propensity for such things in the self shapes the perceptions of his characters. At the novel's beginning, Isabel is described as capable of identifying "the look" of "things that were wrong" when she "fixed them hard," but, having "seen very little of the evil of the world," her knowledge is purely academic (54). She is "too young, too impatient to live, too unacquainted with pain" to do more than "recognize" the sorts of situations that are productive of human misery. The motivations of others, the desires and decisions that cause them to injure each other, are, as yet, mysteries to her, and even the idea that she herself might "inflict[] a sensible injury upon another person" is a horrific possibility that "cause[s] her at moments to hold her breath" (56, 54).

To return, then, to Gardencourt's "ghost." In Isabelle and Ralph's discussion, James signals the distance of his own novel from its literary predecessors by making the revelation promised by the literal and figurative ghosts of gothic and sensation novels something that is only to be conditionally apprehended. A highly discriminating apparition, Gardencourt's "thing that appears" only does so to those who "have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge" (52). That these are the conditions deemed necessary for seeing the ghosts that haunt certain spaces, certain individuals, suggests that the "innocent eye" of the typical gothic or sensation novel heroine will be of little use here in discerning the shadowy mysteries that Isabel is so desirous of penetrating. In this case, perception does not precede knowledge but instead follows from it. This knowledge, too, is of a particular variety—it is

knowledge gained through an extensive acquaintance with suffering. If now virtually synonymous with "hurting," suffering has the connotation of being a more active and persistent state-of-being, a connotation perhaps stemming from its earlier meaning as simply a form of experience or endurance. To suffer is to bear up under a burden, to withstand a painful situation that has been imposed from without. In that suffering originates "from" something, it is a feeling that emerges out of the experience of being in the world. At the same time, suffering is an ontological state that is associated with self-consciousness; to suffer is to submit (either willingly or unwillingly) to pain, an action that requires a certain degree of awareness about the situation in which one has been placed. Thus, suffering has a reflective component to it, suggesting that the sufferer is at once objectively in pain and subjectively capable of analyzing that pain, making it an experience that has a great deal in common with aesthetic contemplation.

Yet, though Isabel's quick survey of the paintings in Gardencourt's gallery convinces Ralph that she is "evidently a judge" and has "natural taste," his conviction that she is "not made to suffer" distinguishes between her fitness for judging aesthetic and social situations (51, 52). He argues that she should be content with "happy knowledge . . . pleasant knowledge" and concludes, "I hope you'll never see the ghost!" (52). Isabel takes umbrage at his comments, and while acknowledging herself "afraid of suffering" (if not of ghosts), she opines that "people suffer too easily" and that "it's not absolutely necessary to suffer; we were not made for that." Ralph uses her observation against her to return to his original point, saying, "You were not, certainly," to which she replies, "I'm not speaking of myself." At the center of this back-and-forth is a crucial difference in how the two characters understand what it means to be "made for" suffering. For Ralph, suffering is a specific category of experience, a state of being that is reserved for those whose "miserable knowledge" has alienated them from the world in some profound way. For Isabel, suffering is all a

matter of perspective; one can have one's eyes opened to uncomfortable truths and not necessarily suffer from the knowledge. As she sees it, suffering is not the inevitable outcome of certain experiences; it is a choice in how one decides to view things.

Isabel's faith in the individual's ability to avoid suffering without avoiding the sorts of situations that give rise to it is the cornerstone of her determination to get "a general impression of life" (56). To Ralph, she seems "presumptuous" in her confidence of her own powers of observation, and, indeed, on more than one occasion, her commitment to experience seems a deliberate courting of the pain she believes herself capable of rising above. Yet, Ralph's suggestion that Isabel is ignorant of the risk she runs is disproved in a later scene that also takes place in Gardencourt's picture gallery, in which Isabel must explain to Lord Warburton why she has refused his offer of marriage. Only one in a series of such refusals, her explanation, in this instance, takes on the shadings of a philosophical disquisition on viewership owing to its unfolding in a properly "aesthetic" space. Again, though, the contemplation of art objects is only of secondary importance to the matter at hand, which is the more general consideration of how one's social position determines perspective. That neither character is under any illusions about what they are scrutinizing in the gallery is clear from the beginning. Lord Warburton, desiring to speak to Isabel alone regarding his marriage proposal, "propose[s] to Isabel to come into the gallery and look at the pictures; and though she knew he had seen the pictures twenty times she complied without criticizing this pretext" (117). Aesthetic contemplation providing the necessary social "pretext" for their discussion, the gallery itself also offers the necessary context for mapping out the dynamics of their relationship, a picture that bears a certain structural similarity to Isabel's first visit with Ralph. Once more, Isabel looks at the pictures while her admirer looks at her:

> Isabel walked to the other side of the gallery and stood there showing him her charming back, her light slim figure, the length of her white neck as she bent her head, and the density of her dark braids. She stopped in front of a small picture as if for the purposes of examining it; and there was something so young and free in her movement that her very pliancy seemed to mock at him. Her eyes, however, saw nothing; they had suddenly been suffused with tears. (118)

The strange angle from which Lord Warburton observes Isabel is suggestive at once of his objectifying gaze and his inability to really "see" her. Her "light slim figure" framed by the picture she seems to be observing, the presented portrait of "her charming back" visually reinforces his frustrated awareness of her emotional impenetrability. Though Warburton does not yet know it, this image of Isabel with her back turned anticipates the reason that she will give him for refusing his hand: that it is not her "fate to give up," that she knows that she will never "be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating [her]self . . . [f]rom life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer" (119). Warburton misunderstands this explanation and criticizes her for being arrogantly "bent on being miserable," a reasonable mistake considering that she essentially is arguing that it is *not* her fate to *not* be unhappy. Isabel sees a life with Lord Warburton as a turning of one's back on the world, a sacrifice of freedom and infinite possibility out of the cowardly wish to "escape unhappiness." To marry him would be to "give up other chances," to give up on chance generally. Though she is not seeking to be unhappy, the possibility that she might be unhappy (as much as she might be anything else) is less a worry for her than that she might live a life insulated from common concerns and devoid of the excitement of uncertainty.

In the same way that Warburton uses the gallery as a "pretext" for engaging Isabel on more serious matters, James uses the "pre-textual" nature of aesthetic space to give what might otherwise be merely a rather prosaic scene of a woman refusing a

suitor the weightier subtext of the individual reflecting on her destiny. As Isabel talks to Warburton, the narrator calls the "expression of her eyes strange," and this strangeness is only fully accounted for after her interview with Warburton is interrupted by the arrival of Ralph, the American journalist Henrietta Stackpole, and Lord Warburton's sister Miss Molyneux. The three interlopers, negotiating the awkward silence surrounding Isabel and Warburton, start a stilted conversation concerning the gallery, with Miss Molyneux first observing to Ralph, "How very many pictures you have! . . . I think it's so nice. I wish we had a gallery at Lockleigh. I'm so very fond of pictures . . . They're so pleasant when it rains" (120). Ralph, tailoring his reply to the "style of reflection . . . acceptable to her," replies, "Ah yes, pictures are very convenient." An exchange that on the surface is almost stunning in its extreme superficiality, it nevertheless offers an ironic commentary on the convenient way in which pictures, both visual and narrative, give substance and clarity to emotions and ideas that cannot be put into words. If Isabel is not capable of articulating to Lord Warburton why she will not marry him, the image of her turned back pliantly bent to examine a picture eloquently communicates her rejection of the life he offers in favor of one of freedom and eager observation. And, if Isabel herself cannot visualize just what it would mean to accept his proposal, she sees "the reflexion of everything she had rejected in rejecting Warburton" in the "grey depths" of the "quiet eyes" of his sister: "the peace, the kindness, the honour, the possessions, a deep security and a great exclusion" (120). To marry Warburton would mean that she too would become "reflective" of all those properties, would become the mirror image of a world in which art objects are merely "convenient," in which—in the words of Henrietta Stackpole—one's social "position" makes it "sufficient for [one] to exist!"

In the framing space of the gallery, Isabel makes the choice of an active over a passive mode of reflection, a choice that is as much social as it is aesthetic. She

decides against a way of life in which experience becomes almost prescripted by the weight and preponderance of cultural and economic privileges meant to define and distinguish, to set the individual apart. Lord Warburton's estate, Lockleigh (a name that, like Gardencourt, seems intended to suggest a natural space somehow enclosed or contained, a "lea" or meadow locked), and his sister, Miss Molyneux, each present Isabel with a concrete image of the social situation she would be choosing by marrying him. The former strikes her as "a noble picture . . . a stout grey pile of the softest, deepest, most weather-fretted hue" and the latter as possessing "a smooth nun-like forehead" and containing within her "such a world of hereditary quiet" (75, 115). Each of these aesthetic impressions is coded, punctuated with descriptors that speak to the exquisite luxury and the picturesque isolation that characterize the position of the nobility. Isabel's final rejection of the possibility of occupying this position is announced in her rather dramatic response to Miss Molyneux's invitation to again visit Lockleigh: "I'm afraid I can never come again" (120). The heavy undertone of this pronouncement is noticed by both Lord Warburton and Ralph: Warburton, after watching "this little passage . . . turn[s] away and stare[s] at a picture" while Ralph "leaning against the rail before the picture . . . watch[es] him" (120-121). That it is now Lord Warburton who seeks refuge from scrutiny in the same manner as had Isabel—by performatively adopting the guise of intense contemplation—speaks to the way in which aesthetic attitudes are themselves social postures, postures that can be falsely assumed to protect the individual from the revelation of unguarded expression. Yet, Ralph, standing next to the picture and across from Warburton, again demonstrates his awareness of this fact, as he observes with interest and sympathy his friend's self-conscious attempt to conceal his disappointment.

Ultimately, though, as befits Ralph's role as the reader's surrogate, his sympathy for Warburton is outweighed by his curiosity regarding Isabel's future,

which he persists in viewing as a sort of theatrical performance arranged for his, and others', diversion. When Isabel later asks him his opinion on her refusal, he announces himself "without a wish on the subject" (133). For a person so professedly invested in Isabel, this absence of judgment only makes sense if one considers Ralph's understanding of his own role, which is solely as a disinterested (in the aesthetic sense of the word) spectator. In this light, Isabel's decision is neither good nor bad; it is merely interesting, all the more so because, in turning down Warburton, Isabel has "kept the game in [her] hands," retaining the possibility of doing something "unexpected" with her "career" (133). Isabel, alarmed by Ralph expecting from her "grand examples of anything," claims for herself a much more meager intention. She remarks simply, "But I do want to look around me . . . I only want to see for myself" (134). For Ralph, however, this aim, above anything else, is the "great thing" that makes her most deserving of an audience, and, when Isabel again takes issue with his praise, he begs her, "Don't repudiate it. It's so fine!" Speaking less like a cousin and friend than as a connoisseur, Ralph's enthusiastic appreciation of Isabel's desire "to see life" objectifies her, not as a woman but as a viewer or, perhaps more specifically, as a instrument of viewership. If he has little interest in her as a beautiful, desirable object, he admires the sensitivity and freshness of her perceptual faculties with almost the same amount of reverence and ardor that her many suitors lavish on her person.

Yet, Ralph's very appreciation for Isabel-as-viewer is at the root of the tragedy that unfolds after he encourages his father to give Isabel a fortune capable of satisfying her desire to see the world. Focused solely on Isabel viewing the social scene before her, he is curiously blind to the way her vision can be manipulated and put to use. Though he is truly aesthetically disinterested—enjoying her impressions of the world for their own sake—others are not, and it is with Isabel's introduction to those characters whose aesthetic faculties and postures are always in the service of social

ends that James begins the conversion he speaks of in the preface, transforming her aesthetic adventures "into the stuff of drama or, even more delightful word still, of 'story'" (14). In the Preface James cites two scenes as exemplary of this narrative conversion: one is Isabel's midnight meditation near the novel's conclusion and the other is her early encounter with the brilliant Madame Merle. While the former scene is quite evidently significant—both to Isabel and the reader—in the moment at which it occurs, the latter only becomes important in hindsight. Isabel has no major revelation upon meeting Madame Merle, only a vague awareness that this interesting new person will have an impact on her life. Madame Merle, though, turns out to be both Ralph's foil and his dark double, in secret competition with him as an architect of Isabel's destiny. As Ralph epitomizes the gentleman-aesthete, Madame Merle, whose name also seems an allusion, this time to Laclos's scheming Marquise de Merteuil, embodies the "great lady" of culture, "so cultivated and civilized, so wise and so easy" (166).[171] "With all society under contribution, and all the arts and graces it practiced," she raises sociality itself to an art form, her mastery of accomplishments (painting, music, embroidery, reading) all aiding her ability to create just the right impression on her viewers. In the summation of the narrator, she is "in short the most comfort*able*, profit*able*, amen*able* person to live with," an alluring sight to the curious Isabel (Is-*able*) (167, italics mine).

One thing of note in this description is how the language used to characterize Madame Merle says nothing of intrinsic qualities but, rather, has everything to do with her relation to others. She is able to give comfort, able to answer or respond to some outside pressure, and, most importantly, able to generate a profit. The matter of Madame Merle's "profitability" is especially intriguing, because no character (with the

[171] That Madame Merle in both name and person bears a startling resemblance to the Marquise de Merteuil from Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) is noted by Elizabeth Jean Sabiston in *The Prison of Womanhood: Four Provincial Heroines in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Houndsmill: Macmilllan, 1987) 133.

notable exception of Osmond) on the surface seems more removed from the public sphere of money and the market. Without a fortune of her own, Madame Merle seems to exist almost entirely on the kindness of acquaintances, moving perpetually from country home to villa, always visiting one or another of her vast circle of friends. Yet, as Mrs. Touchett points out, to host Madame Merle is hardly a charitable action: "It is a favor to me that she stays; she's putting off a lot of visits at great houses. . . . She has her pick of places" (169). What allows Serena Merle the luxury of choice in this regard is her ability to distinguish what action is "most to the convenience" of her audience, "which she always inevitably divined" (167). Possessed with an intuitive sense of her company's predilections, she facilitates social encounters tailored to their varying tastes. It is, in this way, that she turns a profit, both for her interlocutors (who have had their sensibilities gratified) and for herself (in their continued desire for her presence).

James describing Madame Merle's distinguishing personality trait—her "social quality"—in both aesthetic and economic terms speaks to his interest in revealing the connection between the beautiful form and the marketable function of the social relation. She is at once the epitome of taste and yet inherently cynical in her determination to use that taste to serve her ends. Even Isabel, at first too awestruck by the glossy finish of Madame Merle's public persona to be critical, displays a degree of awareness regarding the inauthentic excessiveness of her new friend's "merits":

> If for Isabel she had a fault it was that she was not natural . . . Her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away. She had become too flexible, too useful, was too ripe and too final. She was in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be . . . Isabel found it difficult to think of her in any detachment or privacy, she existed only in her relations, direct and indirect, with her fellow mortals . . . She was deep, and her nature spoke none the less in her behavior because it spoke a conventional tongue. (167)

A challenge to the familiar conflation of the social with the superficial, Isabel's impression of Madame Merle finds in the latter's smooth surface perfection the intimation of unfathomable depths. Yet, these depths do not conceal some private, authentic self, a self withheld from public display. Instead, it is suggested, Madame Merle's deepness comes from the fact that she has no private self. Having customized herself to "custom," even her "nature" is no longer "natural." She is purely "a social animal," her personality fragmented and diffused throughout a large network of relations. A deeper form of secrecy than privacy, Madame Merle's essential sociality makes it impossible for Isabel (and for others) to visualize her outside of her immediate context. In always being what a particular situation calls for, her actions conform to standards of propriety and, thus, by their very conventionality, resist further scrutiny.

If a mystery to others, Madame Merle's responsiveness to social dynamics makes her especially adept at seeing situationally, of "placing" others within their specific contexts. As she tells Isabel, "[w]hen you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take that shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances" (175). She goes on to declare, "[t]here's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances." It is this notion of selfhood (a notion that Isabel vehemently disagrees with) that drives Madame Merle's central action in the novel: to arrange Isabel's marriage to her former lover, Gilbert Osmond. The adeptness and care with which she goes about achieving this feat thoroughly demonstrates her ability to take the "shell" of social circumstances "into account," as she stages Isabel and Osmond's courtship as a director might a play. Her orchestration of their initial meetings strives to create a particular relation between them, one that James takes pains to establish as strikingly similar to that of aesthetic viewer to art object.

However, since Madame Merle intends for Isabel's admiration to lead to marriage, she is acting not in the capacity of cicerone, but as a dealer, brokering the sale of a precious item to a wealthy buyer.

Traveling to Italy with Mrs. Touchett, Ralph, and Isabel, Madame Merle lays the groundwork for this potential sale by first visiting Osmond in his "ancient villa crowning an olive-muffled hill outside the Roman gate of Florence" (195). The description of the villa anticipates the description of its owner, which foregrounds the fact that, like Gardencourt, a property is always the reflection of its owner. Osmond's villa, though, is even more "private" than Mr. Touchett's estate, as it is more than merely secluded by its proprietor's wealth and privilege; it is a space that embodies its owner's carefully cultivated isolation, his obsession with presenting an imposingly tasteful façade. Seen from the outside, the villa has a strangely "incommunicable character," its heavy stone front giving the impression that one is looking at "the mask, not the face of the house" (195). Even its windows resist their ordinary function, and instead of acting as a conduit for "communication with the world," these "jealous apertures" seem "to defy the world to look in" (196). Anthropomorphizing the structure, imparting to it a malevolently exclusionary impulse, this narrative picture of the villa unsettles precisely because it attributes to the object of scrutiny an active and hostile resistance to perceptual penetration. For a novel whose heroine is animated by her desire to see the world for herself, here, it is suggested, she will encounter a particular challenge, a setting that is already warily anticipatory of the gaze of the prospective viewer. In this regard, Osmond's villa offers a significant modification of the scene of aesthetic encounter. Unlike Gardencourt, it is not a social space in which there are rooms and galleries carefully designated for acts of aesthetic experience. It is a social space the whole of which demands to be understood as an aesthetic object. Like its exterior, its interior also speaks to its owner's efforts to

create an effect; it is described as "a seat of ease . . . telling of arrangements subtly studied and refinements frankly proclaimed" (196). In its display of precious antique artifacts surrounded by comfortable modern furniture chosen to suit the tastes of "a lounging generation," it resembles a museum, the layout of its rooms intended to encourage the visitor to sit and observe.

Yet, the deliberateness with which its many *objets d'art* have been selected and situated (a deliberateness communicated through the narrator's use of demonstratives—"*those* faded hangings," "*those* angular specimens of pictorial art," "*those* perverse-looking relics of medieval brass and pottery") implies that it is not the objects themselves that are truly on display in Osmond's villa. The objects are only beautiful manifestations of what is truly meant for observation: their owner's "studied" subtlety and "pronounced" refinement. Enshrining Osmond's "adorable taste," the aesthetic quality of his villa ultimately is meant to serve a social function, which explains Madame Merle's desire to bring Isabel to his home, because, as she says to him, "as cicerone of your museum you appear to particular advantage" (209). Osmond's "rooms," in her opinion, "are perfect" in that they demonstrate that Osmond "understand[s] this sort of thing as nobody anywhere does" (208). Though she does not get any more specific than that, Madame Merle's comment might be taken to mean that no one else is as capable as Osmond of using his space to set himself off, of using all of his chosen curios to put himself on display in a tasteful manner. But, if Osmond is a genius of aesthetic effect, Madame Merle displays an equal amount of genius in social arrangements. When Osmond asks her what she plans to do with him and Isabel, she replies, "What you see. Put her in your way" (207). Osmond asking, more philosophically than sympathetically, if Isabel is not "meant for something better than that," the answer she gives reveals the amoral relativism that underwrites her mastery of interpersonal relations: "I don't pretend to know what people are meant for . . . I

only know what I can do with them." While there is nothing melodramatically villainous about Madame Merle's plans, her worldview is Machiavellian, to say the least. Having no regard for the concept of individual sovereignty, she approaches all interactions strategically, with an eye towards how a particular alignment of circumstances might best produce the desired result. In this way, she is not so very different from Osmond. Only their chosen spheres of influence distinguish them, spheres of influence that, as the novel repeatedly reminds us, are less comfortingly separate than they might appear.

Indeed, with Madame Merle and Osmond's extended campaign for Isabel's fortune, the success of this social venture depends entirely on their ability to engage Isabel's aesthetic sensibilities, to direct her desire to develop her perceptual faculties into a particular channel. As throughout the novel, the setting is a crucial factor in this process. After all, Isabel has come to Italy to be initiated into "the mystery" of culture, and, in Florence, both Ralph and Madame Merle are the "priests" she has chosen to help with her initiation (211). That they contribute in very different ways to Isabel's aesthetic education is not surprising, as they have in mind very different outcomes. With Ralph, Isabel visits the great repositories of art, where she finds herself "in no want indeed of aesthetic illumination": "she performed all those acts of mental prostration in which, on the first visit to Italy, youth and enthusiasm for frequently indulge; she felt her heart beat in the presence of immortal genius and knew the sweetness of rising tears to which faded fresco and darkened marble grew dim" (211, 212). Madame Merle, who tellingly "remained at home" for those visits, offers her another kind of aesthetic experience in arranging her first meeting with Gilbert Osmond. That James intends these two, seemingly disparate encounters to be understood as related might be assumed from (among other things) the similarities in

Isabel's responses to them.[172] Though not quite in a state of "mental prostration," Isabel's reaction to Osmond's presence is marked by the same intensity of scrutiny; reduced almost to muteness, she sits "there as if she had been at a play and had paid even a large sum for her place" (212). Of course, the scripted quality of Osmond's conversation that Isabel is so captivated by, the "rich readiness" that seems almost to "have come from rehearsal," is, in fact, rehearsed; Madame Merle has told Osmond of Isabel precisely so that he has time to prepare his lines.

Still, Isabel, in her own way, also contributes to the success of his performance by willingly assuming the role that has been laid out for her. Deciding it most "important she should get an impression of him," she makes of herself an attentive audience, allowing "the effect of brilliancy" created by his wit and erudition to "check[] her and h[o]ld her in suspense." She responds to this social spectacle crafted for her benefit as she responded to certain choice art objects on display in the museums and galleries of Florence: she gives herself wholly over to the emotional and sensory aspects of appreciation. But, in the same way that her rapturous tears at the sight of "faded fresco and darkened marble" causes her vision to literally "gr[o]w dim," here, her responsiveness to a display of conversational mastery creates a corresponding intellectual dimness. She accepts unquestioningly the arrangement of this scene for her visual consumption, and, detecting in Osmond's talk a cultivation and craftedness that seems intentional, she assesses it on aesthetic rather than social terms.

Isabel's assessment of him demonstrates her active, if unconscious, engagement with Madame Merle and Osmond's dramatic, highly aestheticized enactment of polite sociality. The perceptible note of affectation that clings to Osmond pleases Isabel (rather than sets her on her guard) because she currently is

[172] Also, the fact that Isabel's trip to the galleries is followed immediately by her introduction to Osmond has the effect of blending one scene of introspection seamlessly into the other.

looking at the world as though it *should* be delivering her precious items for observation. Her impression of Osmond confirms this perspectival orientation. She is charmed by Osmond's "well-bred air of expecting nothing," as it conforms to the aestheticist conception of the art object, as something that (to again rely on Pater) "comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."[173] In Osmond, Isabel detects this elevating quality, and though she admits that "he [i]s not handsome," she is convinced that "he [i]s fine, as fine as one of the drawings in the long gallery above the bridge of the Uffizi" (213). Perhaps no word that she might have chosen is more revealing of the effect of Isabel's aesthetic education than "fine." The same word that Ralph once used to describe her, it says less about the object itself than the perspective of the person who employs it. Connoting quality, purity, delicacy, and polish, the term gestures towards the individual's ability to judge something on aesthetic terms. That Gilbert Osmond is to Isabel somehow consummate, as perfect a specimen as a painting in the Uffizi, suggests that she has already situated him within an internal gallery of other such objects. As she describes him to herself later, he is "a specimen apart," "an original," the first person that she has met "of so fine a grain" (224). In all of these characterizations of Osmond, one sees the increasing success of Isabel's inculcation in the aestheticization of the social.

The strange triangulation between Isabel, Osmond and Madame Merle has a precedent in the novel, even if that precedent is only created retrospectively by James's insertion of the 1908 preface. James's analogy in the preface of the author to an art dealer provides an invaluable model for understanding the social and aesthetic dynamics at play in Madame Merle's plot to marry Isabel to Osmond. When in the Preface James portrays himself as a dealer "in precious odds and ends," he invites the

[173] *The Renaissance* 190.

reader to notice the mercantile aspect of aesthetic appreciation. If Isabel Archer has "been placed" in "the dusky, crowded, heterogeneous backdrop of the mind," this placement is only temporary. The dealer makes his living by placing those objects in his nominal possession in the hands of buyers, buyers who he must convince of the value of what he has to sell. The difficulty with this process, though, is that aesthetic "value" is not (and, it might be argued, cannot be) reducible to economic terms. The cachet of the art object is that its value is somehow extra-monetary; to buy art is to exchange real money for cultural currency, to invest in a market with largely social dividends and returns.

While Isabel does not yet know it, Madame Merle is brokering a similar sort of deal, with Isabel as the prospective buyer and Osmond as the "rare little piece" that can be purchased by the hard currency provided by her inheritance. Again, though, because of the application of aesthetic forms onto social situations that characterizes most of the interpersonal relations of this novel, the matter of money is what must be obscured, lest it sully what on both sides must be seen as a romantic, as opposed to an economic, transaction. Thus, Osmond, like the art object, is always presented as somehow outside the realm of social exchange. When Madame Merle first describes him to Isabel, she underscores the fact that he has "no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything," but for all that, he is still "a man made to be distinguished" (172, 171). In even this first mention of Osmond, Madame Merle proves herself the uncontested "mistress of the social art," by placing in Isabel's head the embryo of the idea that Osmond, being "*made to be* distinguished," is in need of someone to accomplish for him that feat. Madame Merle's perspicacity in this instance can be attributed to her thorough knowledge of her audience. Though initially unnerved by her unexpected inheritance, Isabel has since reconciled herself to her good luck by imaginatively translating the dollars and cents she has been given

into what that money might purchase; she has already "lost herself in a maze of visions; the fine things to be done by a rich, independent, generous girl who took a large human view of occasions and obligations" (193). Madame Merle simply gives those visions an object, introducing Isabel to a particular social relation that serves her requirement of exciting aesthetic admiration. What *finer* thing can be done than to marry what she later admits is "the *finest*—in the sense of being the subtlest—manly organism she had every known" (358)? Appealing directly to Isabel's desire to prove herself a connoisseur, Madame Merle—like the curio dealer—provides her with the opportunity to put her fortune to good use, by making Gilbert Osmond her "property" and, thus, a reflection of her taste and discretion.

On Osmond's side, the chance to be acquired by Isabel meets a corresponding need. As the narrator describes it,

> If an anonymous drawing on a museum wall had been conscious and watchful it might have known this peculiar pleasure of being at last and all of a sudden identified—as from the hand of a great master—by the so high and so unnoticed fact of style. His "style" is what the girl had discovered with a little help; and now, besides herself enjoying it, she should publish it to the world without his having any of the trouble. (260)

Osmond tells Isabel at one point that the individual "ought to make one's life a work of art," and, to the extent that his "style" is the only means by which he can be properly "identified," he has succeeded (261). What is curious about this analogy, though, is that it leaves open the possibility that whoever has attributed to Osmond the mark of a master is incorrect, as "style" is something that can be emulated. Taking this idea a bit further, the very anonymity of Osmond-as-drawing uneasily resonates with the narrator's earlier description of him as a man strangely scrubbed free of all defining characteristics that would allow others to divine his origins, suggesting that,

as a work of art, there is a strong chance that he might be a counterfeit.[174] Of course, the success of any counterfeit depends on a number of factors, not least among them there being a market for such goods. Moreover, there have to be established standards of judgment and widely-accepted practices for authentication in order for the counterfeit to pass itself off as "real." By manipulating those standards and practices, the counterfeit calls into question the validity of these means of ascribing value and, to a certain extent, jeopardizes the integrity of the whole process by which such items are judged. In some ways, this is just what Osmond's deception does to the scene of aesthetic encounter in James's novel. Appropriating those aesthetic objects and images to shore up his own personal "style," he empties out the vast symbolic economy created by those things. Instead of situating him within a wider network of value, the various paintings, drawings, curios, and other assorted bric-a-brac he collects serve to reify the "finish" or "fineness" of his public persona. No longer can any single aesthetic object be used to interpret him, to open him up to scrutiny through his relation to it. All the objects he selects become iterations of the same formula, proving again and again the existence of his own "style." And Isabel, the viewer deemed most capable of publishing these findings far and wide, is meant to expedite the process, as her "quick, fanciful mind . . . saved one repetitions and reflected one's thought on a polished, elegant surface" (296). Like "a silver plate . . . he could tap with his knuckles and make . . . ring," Isabel is useful to Osmond as a reflective surface in which he can enjoy the totality of the impression he has worked so hard to create; her perception is transformed from a window into a mirror, from a consciousness that *sees through* to an instrument that one *sees oneself in*.

[174] In this earlier description, the narrator says, "You would have been at a loss to determine his original clime and country; he had none of the superficial signs that usually render the answer to this question an insipidly easy one" (197).

Given that Osmond triumphs in his efforts to ensnare Isabel and to use her faculties and fortune to announce his value "to the world," do we understand that triumph to signify that James himself finds the form of the aesthetic relation to have become meaningless? Is his novel a testament to the author's belief that the aesthetic encounter is now an empty social ritual now devoid of the belief system that (through earlier novels) brought it into being? If the novel concluded with Isabel in the same benighted state that led to her entrapment, those questions might be answered in the affirmative. However, Isabel still has one more social scene to view, one that brings with it a painful revelation on her part that both exposes the heavy cost associated with looking at the world from a purely aesthetic angle and yet also offers a certain hope for rescuing the aesthetic encounter from those whose use of it has made it a powerful weapon in the arsenal of social manipulation. This scene occurs after Isabel and Osmond have settled into being politely but unhappily married, after Isabel has begun to realize that, contrary to her earlier impression, her husband is hardly as disinterested in the world as he previously appeared. Still at a loss to explain to herself the discontent she feels with her situation, she happens to covertly witness her husband and Madame Merle in an unguarded moment:

> Just beyond the threshold of the drawing-room, she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had just received an impression. The impression had, in strictness, nothing unprecedented; but she felt it as something new, and the soundlessness of her step gave her time to take in the scene . . . Madame Merle was standing on the rug . . . Osmond was in a deep chair . . . What struck Isabel first was that he was sitting while Madame Merle stood; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her. Then she perceived that they . . . were musing face to face, with the freedom of old friends . . . There was nothing to shock in this . . . But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected. (343)

Early in the novel, Isabel is described as the sort of person who "evidently caught impressions," but here, the impression is not something she catches but "receive[s]"

(28, 343). The notable use of the passive voice in this instance suggests that this impression (as opposed to others previously encountered) intrudes upon Isabel's consciousness wholly unexpectedly, which, on the most basic level, accounts for her feeling of surprise. Not expecting to come upon her husband and Madame Merle, she is "stopped short" by her immediate and involuntary response to this sight. Yet, her immediate sensorial reaction is only a small part of the "reason" that this moment makes such an impact on her. The real force behind the impression lies in her recognition that this sight, which contains "nothing unprecedented," nevertheless *feels* like "something new." Though she has seen her friend and husband together many times previously, their relation to each other here is lifted out of the familiar flow of everyday sociality and is momentarily frozen into a static image, a picture framed by the "threshold" of the doorway beyond which Isabel is standing. Moreover, this image is arresting precisely because its various components are not (to use a painting term) "in keeping." For Madame Merle to be standing while Osmond sits is inconsistent with the bourgeois standards of deportment towards the opposite sex to which they usually so rigorously, even performatively, adhere. Viewed as a tableau, the setting, the two figures, their mutually-absorbed gazes, their respective postures and their spatial relation do not add up to a coherent, unremarkable, harmonious whole, and a picture that Isabel concedes should feel familiar instead produces a sense of the uncanny.

To strike an impression is to make a literal or figurative indentation on the surface of something by applying pressure to it. In Isabel's case, the impression on her consciousness of the picture of her husband and Madame Merle is made with two strikes. The first strike is her sudden awareness of the anomalousness of their "relative positions," and the second is the realization that in this anomaly there is "something [to be] detected." Isabel has yet to realize what this "something" is, but

her impression of the pair is significant in that it gives aesthetic form to the true social relation between them. Up until this point, Isabel has only seen Osmond and Madame Merle as they have wanted to be seen; she has been an appreciative but ultimately uncomprehending audience of the spectacle that they have staged for her benefit. In this instance, though, she has caught the pair vis-à-vis, a position that they usually studiously avoid. Typically, the narrator suggests, "[i]n the manner and tone of these two persons . . . especially when they met in the presence of others, was something indirect and circumspect, as if they had approached each other obliquely and addressed each other by implication" (207). Masters of misdirection, the pair excels at directing the eye of the viewer away from their connection to each other, which is why it is only when Isabel happens upon them unawares that she is given a direct view of the intimacy of their relation. Adam Parkes has made the argument that Isabel's impressions are the products of a receptive but untrained sensibility and that *The Portrait of a Lady* can be read as a progress narrative of sorts in which Isabel's "faculty of seeing [comes to be] reinforced by a capacity for judging" and "she learn[s] to translate impressions into knowledge."[175] While Parkes is right to stress Isabel's aesthetic education—her acquiring of a refined mode of perception forged out a series of disastrous misreadings and out of the suffering they occasion--this argument downplays the importance of *situation* and *circumstance*, all of the material aspects of the viewing experience, in Isabel's discovery of Osmond and Madame Merle's "plot" by attributing this discovery to the development of her rational faculties. If Isabel has, in fact, become more of a "judge" by the novel's conclusion, it is still the case that the revelatory impression of her husband and friend "familiarly associated" is the product of a fortuitous alignment of contingencies. That she "receives" this impression, instead of seeking it out, suggests that it is (at least

[175] Adam Parkes, "A Sense of Justice: Whistler, Ruskin, James, Impressionism," *VS* 42:4 (Summer 1999/2000) 619.

partially) the form and the framing of the aesthetic encounter that determines the viewer's capacity for detection or judgment.

That being said, Isabel would not have been as "impressed" by the image of Osmond and Madame Merle if she had not already learned how to map aesthetic viewing models onto social situations, allowing her to conceive of social conventions as *form*al behaviors that can be analyzed as one might an art object. It is only because she is able to visually compare the picture made by her husband and friend to an ideal image of how the picture *should* look that she is able to grasp the import of its deviations from the standard. In many ways, this moment offers the clearest expression of how processes of aesthetic contemplation function on both literal and tropological levels in James's novel, for in the description of Isabel's impression we see how actual sensory content (the substance of what she sees) also operates on a symbolic level, creating a visual analogue for feelings and suspicions she was previously unable to organize into coherent thought. To expand on this point by way of an example, early in her courtship, Isabel is observing a particular painting in Osmond's home, when he tells her, "[l]et me take down that picture; you want more light" (224). Though Osmond's comment only concerns the physical conditions of viewership—the importance of proper lighting when scrutinizing an art object—this statement is given a retrospective resonance when considered in relation to the comparison of her later impression to "a sudden flicker of light" (343). The "light" in this latter case is strictly metaphorical. It refers not to how Isabel sees (with the aid of light) but what she sees (light itself, the truth of their relationship). But, if we consider that the language and practices of aesthetic contemplation in *The Portrait of a Lady* function like a cognitive framework that determines the individual's orientation towards the world, we see that the first moment offers a literal model of viewership on which the second, more abstract moment is predicated.

Indeed, throughout James's novel, various characters are depicted in attitudes of aesthetic observation, yet the art objects and artifacts that they are studying are rarely more than glancingly mentioned. The question, then, is why include those moments of aesthetic encounter at all, if not to suggest the pervasiveness of art culture and the way in which it sets the terms for all forms of visual encounter? By largely refusing to identify or describe the artworks and curios his characters collect, observe, and revere, James strips away the rich tapestry of symbols that in earlier novels served to narrativize a character's individual engagement with culture. In doing so, he exposes the basic structure that underlies all of these engagements, that of the aesthetic encounter. Taken out of its familiar narrative context (the museum or the gallery), the aesthetic encounter in James's novel is "turned" into a literary trope, a figure of thought that provides a means of conceptualizing the individual's relation to the world.[176]

Isabel's aesthetic encounter with the image of Osmond and Madame Merle becomes, for her, just such a trope. Her impression of the pair serves as a kind of specular instrument, half-filter and half-screen, that temporarily illuminates for her the vast and complicated history between the two of which she has been thus far deliberately kept in the dark. Directly preceding what James himself calls his "young woman's extraordinary midnight vigil"—the extended "representation simply of her motionlessly *seeing*"—her impression of Osmond and Madame Merle provides the visual "pretext" on which this vigil is grounded (14-15). Taking place in the drawing-room, the same room in which she glimpsed the pair in an unsettling, charged

[176] In this way, James's understanding of the aesthetic relation and the language of aesthetics more generally might be seen to function in much the same way as what Kenneth Burke has called "the terministic screen" in *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966): "Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than another. Also, many of the 'observations' are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made" (46).

proximity, her meditation is figured as a kind of terrifying if rapturous retreat into the confusing darkness of her mind:

> Her soul was haunted with terrors which crowded to the foreground of thought as quickly as a place was made for them. What had suddenly set them into livelier motion she hardly knew, unless it were the strange impression she had received in the afternoon of her husband's being in more direct communication with Madame Merle than she had suspected. (355)

Coming "back to her from time to time" throughout her meditation, this "strange impression" of her husband and Madame Merle in "direct communication" creates a mental space for reflection, offering a concrete image that allows her to scrutinize the surprising depth and intimacy of their connection. She also uses this image to compare the relation between her husband and her friend to her own relation to Osmond, and, thinking about her married life in spatial terms, she is capable of recognizing the insurmountable divide between them, a divide founded largely on conflict between the ways in which she and Osmond "look at life" (359). In the case of Osmond, his critical, aestheticizing gaze perpetuates and reinforces the social conventions against which he measures his own conduct. Though the world appears to him mostly as "base, ignoble," it nevertheless "afford[s] a standard," from which one can "extract . . . some recognition of one's own superiority" (360). The act of perception, as it is used by Osmond, is a ritual of self-worship, demonstrating what Bachelard has called the "spectacle complex in which pride of seeing is the core of the consciousness of a being in contemplation."[177] For this reason, Osmond's is not simply a failure of vision; it is a foreclosure of it. The aesthetic posture, the life of the aristocratic observer, for him is "altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude" constructed mostly for the appreciation of other viewers (361). When captivated by Osmond, Isabel's impression of him is merely a reflection of how he

[177] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) 190.

sees himself, an impression that is confined to a vague admiration for his appearance, the "indefinable beauty about him—in his situation, in his mind, in his face" (357).

Isabel's latest impression, by contrast, goes deeper and, thus, opens up the narrative, providing a glimpse of what lies behind the cold, concrete surface of social forms: the web of overlapping, conflicting, and conjoining motivations that bind people together, the interpersonal and intersubjective relations that are obscured by their adherence to accepted conventions of behavior. The anomalous image of Osmond and Madame Merle sets into motion for Isabel a series of connected reflections, all of which pertain to pivotal moments in her courtship and married life. Surveying these moments now "in the light of deepening experience," she is able to detect the implications in various social interactions, to see the craftedness of others' actions and the reasons for them. Fittingly, it is with her development of this mode of perception that Isabel finally becomes acquainted with suffering, which, she realizes, is "an active condition . . . not a chill, a stupor, a despair" but "a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure" (356). With her impression casting "a livid light" upon her recent past, Isabel locates a new aesthetic disposition, one rooted in the painful awareness of the potential treachery of forms both artistic and social, of the danger they present to the viewer unable to recognize how their arrangement can be manipulated to present a particular image and evoke a particular response. Even Isabel's own past behavior is less of a mystery to her now. She realizes that her decision to marry Osmond, though rooted in aesthetic admiration, was also motivated by a desire to relieve herself of the "burden" of her fortune by "transfer[ing] the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle" (358). If Osmond used her, she also, on some level, used Osmond, if only as a means of "doing something appreciable with her money." That there is no purely unselfconscious gesture and that all relations are motivated by the principle of social and economic

exchange are only two specific incarnations of the truth of which she becomes conscious over the course of her late-night vigil. What she comes to see through the image of "her husband and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated"—an image that pivotally opens and closes her meditation—is that all individual acts of perception and evaluation are contained within, perhaps even predestined by, the framework of sociality. Elevated to the level of a trope, a concrete expression of relationality, Isabel's impression is no longer just a light to see by, but its own flicker of light, her vision no longer just a means of assessing what is before her eyes but a more profound way of understanding being in the world.

Having grasped this truth, Isabel is given one final social encounter that takes on the most exquisite of aesthetic forms. Visiting her cousin Ralph on his deathbed, she shares with him the substance of her revelation, and examining with him the "architectural vastness" of the social and aesthetic structures that have determined their existence, they attain the bittersweet reward of such endeavors, the "only knowledge that was not anguish—the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together" (478). With this image, James offers the possibility of redeeming the aesthetic encounter from the solipsistic machinations of viewers like Osmond and Madame Merle. If Isabel cannot be saved or even released from "suffering" (this release is only given to Ralph with his death), she at least has attained the intimacy that she formerly sought with Osmond, an intimacy based on a shared regard "for truth and knowledge" and the "belie[f] that two intelligent people ought to look for them together" (359). Isabel achieves (if only momentarily) this intimate, shared vision through her somber tête-à-tête with Ralph in the gloomy sickroom of Gardencourt. Not face-to-face like Osmond and Madame Merle in the drawing room, she and Ralph are head-to-head, leaning close together as they "look" not *at* but *with* each other. Throughout *The Portrait of a Lady*, relations between people have been figured in

terms of mutual observation, a meeting of eyes that frequently only reinforces the distance between the perspectives of the viewers. Here, though, instead of studying the facades of each other's public personas, Ralph and Isabel instead survey the vast edifice of circumstances that brought them to this point, their joint perspective also shared by the reader. The object of their observation remains largely undescribed, which underscores the fact that what is important in this intensely private moment is not *what* they see but *that* they are seeing it together. Though fleeting, their shared aesthetic encounter with the social structure that brought them into such close emotional and perceptual contact is given a kind of narrative after-life, when Isabel awakes the morning of Ralph's death to see "a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room. She stared for a moment; she saw his white face—his kind eyes; then she saw there was nothing" (479). Apparently having "filled the necessary condition" of having "live[d] to suffer enough," she finally has encountered "the ghost with which the old house was duly provided": Ralph himself. A final gesture towards the specters of the gothic novel and the novel of aesthetic experience in his own text, James, by making Ralph the "thing that appears" to Isabel, exemplifies the point that he made in his review of Wilkie Collins: having undergone the trial of an aesthetic education in social forms, the individual can only hope for the deeper sort of perception that allows one to recognize that "most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors."

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